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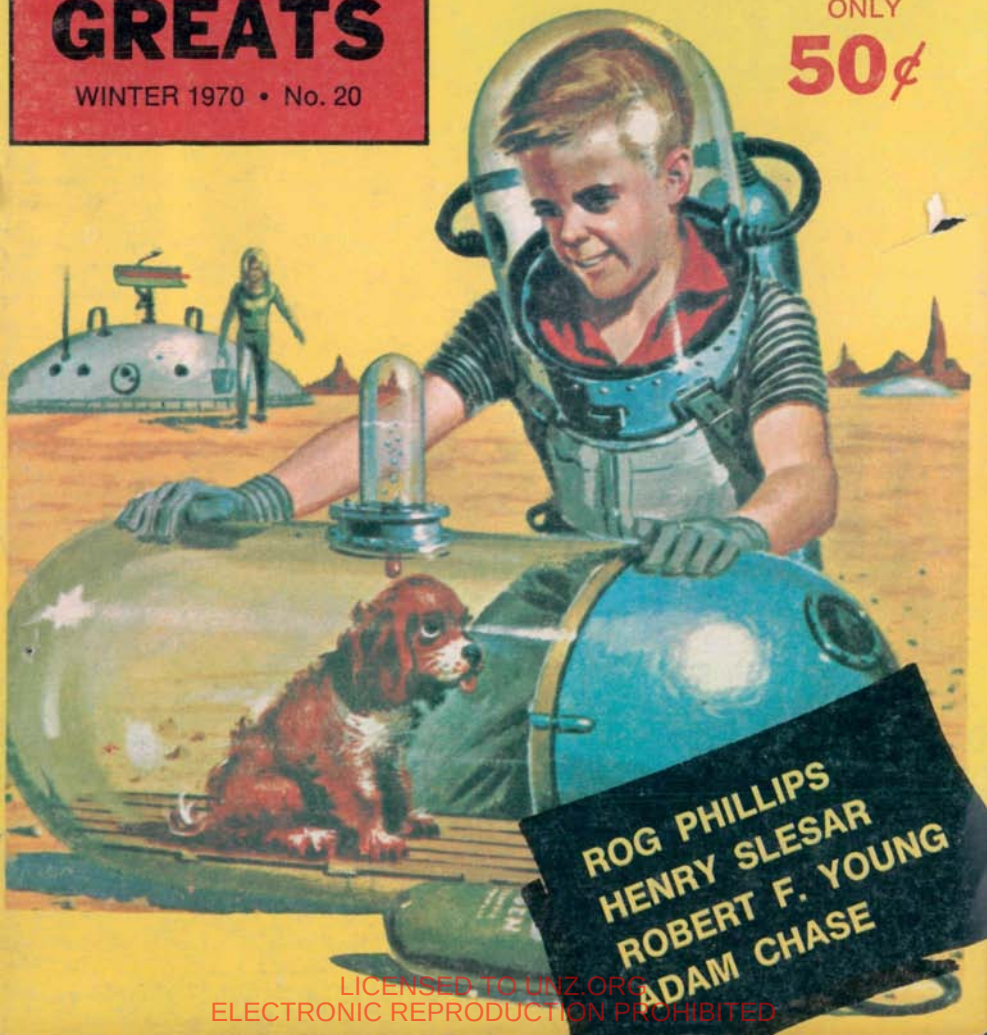

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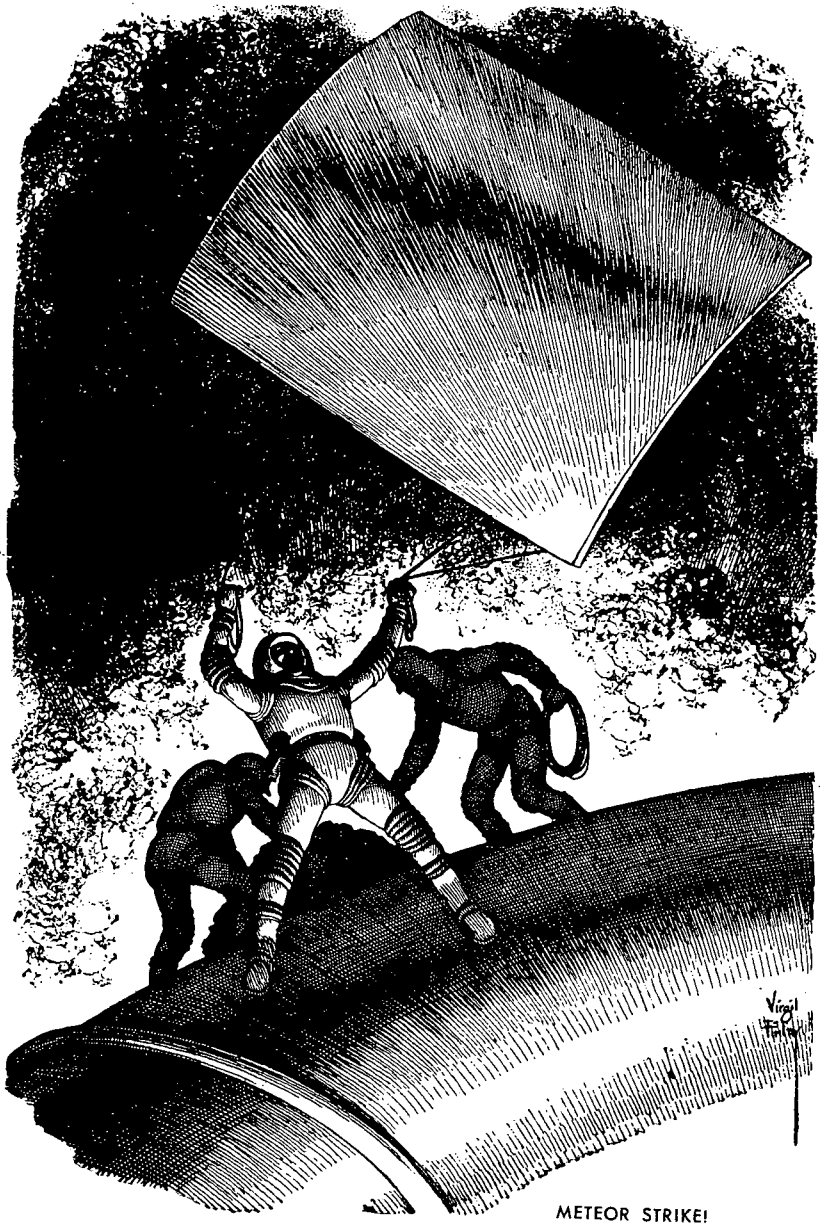

METEOR STRIKE!
By Donald E. Westlake

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S F GREATS

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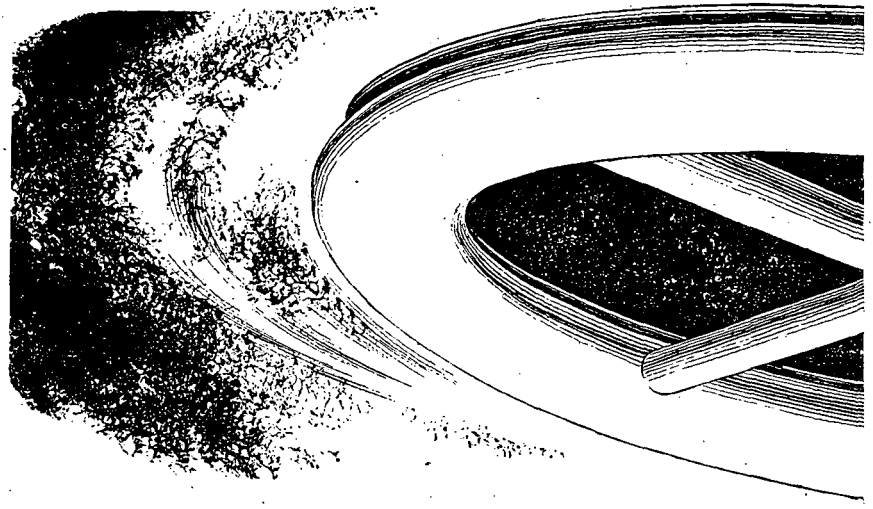

METEOR STRIKE!

By DONALD E. WESTLAKE

Illustrated by FINLAY

Harvey Ricks had always bit off more than he cared to chew. Somehow, he had always managed to chew, and swallow. Now, standing for the first time in the vacuum of Space, he wondered if this was the bite that would choke him.

THE CARGO was crated for delivery at Los Angeles, where the workers didn't consider it anything special. In the company where they worked, this particular cargo was of the type called a Standing Repeater. That is, a new order was shipped out every six months, regular as clockwork. First the order department mailed off a suggested list of specifications to the General

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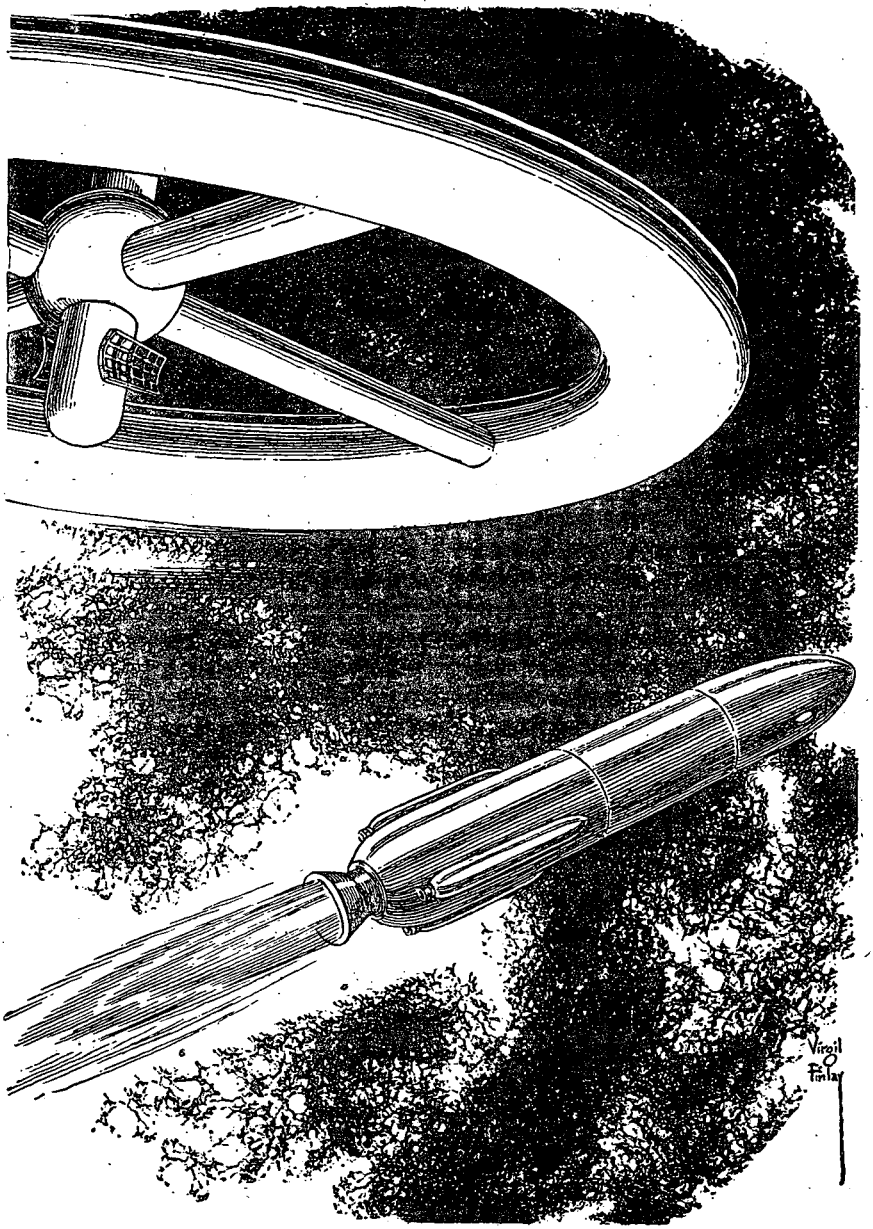

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Transits, Ltd. main office in Tangiers. Next, the list came back, usually with a few substitutions inked in, and was sent down to LA, to the warehouse, for the specific items to be crated for shipment.

There were seven aluminum crates in the cargo, each a three-foot cube. Aluminum was still the lightest feasible crating material, and this cargo was destined for the Quartermaster Base orbiting the Moon.

The seven crates left the warehouse by helicopter and were flown north to the airport midway between LA and San Francisco. There they spent thirty-two hours in another warehouse before being flown to the Tangiers Poe. (Even in nomenclature, Man made it apparent that his thoughts these days were ever outward, away from Earth. The spaceport on Earth was called Tangiers Poe, which stood for Port Of Embarkation. The spaceport on the Moon was called Moon Pod, for Port Of Debarkation. It was as though Man didn't want to admit that he still had to make the round trip.)

The cargo arrived at the Tangiers Poe a day ahead of schedule, and spent one more night in a warehouse. Across the field, the four lighters from Station One were being unloaded. Their cargo was almost exclusively manufactured items from the factories on the Moon. Manufacturers had discovered, to their astonishment, that the lighter gravity and the accessible vacuum and the ready availability of free raw materials on the Moon more than offset the additional cost of labor and buildings and transportation. In the last fifteen years, the Moon had become studded with heavily-automated factories, producing everything from delicate electronic equipment to razor blades. Though human exploitation of the Moon had begun as a military venture, back in the late nineteen-sixties, by 1994 it had been taken over almost completely by commercial interests.

A few of the cartons being unloaded across the field were samples or data from the scientific teams on the Moon. These teams, all affiliated with one university or another, were for the most part supported by the manufacturers themselves. As at all times in the past, commercial business success had been shortly followed by commercial philanthropy. A part of the profits of what one newspaper columnist had dubbed the Moonufacturers were shiphoned off to give scientists an opportunity and a freedom for research and investigation unavailable through any short-range Government grant.

There were as yet no tourist facilities either for travel to the Moon nor for a stay on the Moon.

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A rumor was current that a number of hotel and restaurant corporations were banding together to found a Moon resort, but so far nothing had come of it.

The seven aluminum crates spent the night in the Poe warehouse, and in the morning were turned over to Glenn Blair, whose charge they would be for the next thirty-three days, until they reached the Quartermaster Base.

GLENN BLAIR was a big man, big-boned and fully-fleshed, with a short-cropped head of light hair. Thirty-four years of age, he had been for the last seven years one of the two Chief Cargomasters for General Transits, Ltd., the franchised operator of the Earth-Moon transportation system.

He came into the warehouse now with Cy Braddock, the Poe Cargo Chief, and the two of them compared the stacked crates half-filling the warehouse with the manifest flimsies attached to Braddock's, checking off each item as they found it. When they came to the seven crates from Los Angeles, Blair said, "Cargo for QB. Let's see, what's the specification?" He read the line on the manifest, and grinned. "I forgot it was time for another shipment. Six months already." He patted the nearest of the seven crates. "The boys at QB will be happy to see you fellas," he said.

Braddock looked over his shoulder and read the specification. "What's so important about that stuff? I thought that was low priority."

"Check your regs, Cy. These fellas are priority number one. If they don't get to QB, there'll be hell to pay. Within a month, QB would be more dangerous than a cannibal village."

Braddock shook his head. "You people have a funny set of values," he said. "The more I know about you, the happier I am to stay right here. Come on, let's finish the checkout and get loading. Takeoff is scheduled for eleven-seventeen."

They finished the first checking of the cargo, and went on out of the shed and across the sunbaked tarmac toward the lighter. The Tangiers Poe was a great concrete oval, ringed by warehouse sheds and repair huts and administration buildings. All of Earth's space shipping was conducted here, close to the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, where perfect flight conditions were rarely marred by clouds or rain or cold. Where flight plans include three variables—a lighter moving from a moving Earth to a moving Space Station—no one can afford delays caused by bad weather.

In the shed, the cargo handlers

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loaded small open-sided carts, which were then driven across the field to the lighter. The cargo for QB came out on the second cart, and Glenn Blair supervised its careful stowing and tying down in the hold, then made the second check after its specification line on the manifest. The first checkmark meant that he had found the seven crates in undamaged condition in the shed. The second one meant that he had accepted delivery onto the lighter. Eight more checkmarks would be made before the cargo was finally delivered to QB.

All cargo and personnel traveling between the Earth and the Moon made the trip in five stages. Stage One was transit from the surface of the Earth to the Space Station, aboard a torpedo-shaped ship familiarly known as a lighter. Stage Two was aboard the Station, during its fifteen-day trip from perigee, four hundred miles up, to apogee, eighty-four thousand miles from Earth. (Space Stations One and Two circled the Earth, one at perigee whenever the other was at apogee, so that a shipment left for the Moon every fifteen days.) Stage three was via a ship technically known as V-T-V (vacuum-to-vacuum) but informally called the Barbell, because of its shape. This stage also took fifteen days, and covered sixty-two thousand miles, terminating at its meeting with Space Station Three, eighty-four thousand miles from the Moon. Station Three orbited the Moon every fifteen days, so that this lap of the trip, Stage Four, took seven and a half days. And finally Stage Five, via another lighter, was from Station Three at perigee two hundred fifty miles above the Moon to the surface of the Moon itself or, as in the case of the seven aluminum crates from Los Angeles, from Station Three to Quartermaster Base, the maintenance satellite for the whole system, in permanent orbit two hundred miles above the surface of the Moon.

Although it had taken four lighters, this trip, to bring down to the Poe the shipment of manufactured goods and scientific samples from the Moon, only one lighter was required for the return shipment. The Moon colony was not yet self-supporting, but the first steps in that direction had already been made. A part of the colony's food was homegrown, hydroponically. New plant buildings and new machinery were built right on the Moon, by firms whose only customers were other Moon companies. Clothing and furnishings were made of synthetics.

Most of the Moon-bound cargo was paperwork, of one sort or another. There was the fifteen days accumulation of mail for the

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Moon personnel, sheafs of new product specifications for the managers of the Moon plants, financial reports, and so on. The rest, except for the cargo for QB, was primarily food, meat and dairy products and other foods unavailable through hydroponics. There were also three engineers, new employees of Interplanetal Business Machines, replacing three men whose two year contracts were ending and who would be coming back to Earth on the next transit.

BLAIR greeted the three men at the lighter ramp, checking their names and identity cards against the manifest and then saying, "My name's Blair, Glenn Blair. I'm Cargomaster on this trip, and you boys are part of the cargo. You've got any questions or problems, bring them to me. I'm liaison between you and the rest of the Transit personnel. Okay?"

One of the engineers said, "If we decide we can't take it we shouldn't bug the working types, is that it?"

"You're Ricks? Yes, Ricks, that's exactly it. None of you people have been off-planet before, so you can't make any sure statements about how you'll act. A good quarter of our first-time passengers are plenty scared. It's nothing to be ashamed of. If any of you feel it getting to you come to me. Don't try to burrow your way through the wall, don't try to kill yourself, don't go running around screaming. We've had all of that, at one time or another, and it plays merry hell with the working day."

Ricks grinned. "If I need a shoulder to cry on, Mister Blair," he said, "I'll run straight to you."

"You do that. Come on, I'll show you your quarters."

Blair led the way up the ramp and into the lighter. The bottom half of the ship was engine and fuel-space, and most of the upper half was cargo hold, leaving only two levels at the top for human occupancy. The uppermost level was the control room, with passenger space on the level beneath.

The three engineers, Ricks in the lead, followed Blair up the inside ladder to the second level, a smallish circular room with twelve bunks, in tiers of three, around the walls. The center space was empty.

"There's only four of us," said Blair, "so we can all take middle bunks. The middle's best; there's less noise and vibration."

"Beds for the babies, is that it?" said Ricks.

Blair grinned at him. "You wouldn't want to be standing up when we blast," he said. "Now, you lie face down in these bunks. This indentation is for your

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knees, and this pillow up here is for your chin. You hold onto these handles here, in front of the pillow, and you brace your feet against this bar back here. Just before we blast, you dig your chin down into that pillow hard. If you have your mouth open, you're liable to get up to the Station minus a few teeth. In front of each bunk here, you see these three lights. The green one means you can relax, talk if you want to, readjust your position, whatever you want. The orange one means a blast within one minute, and the red one means a blast within ten seconds. The red one stays on throughout a blast. Okay?"

Ricks said, "The company had us play with these cribs. They filled us in pretty good."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm always pleased to get my human cargo to the Pod alive. Let's get into the bunks now and get ourselves ready. Blast is due in a couple minutes."

Blair saw to it that the three engineers were properly situated in their bunks, and then he crawled into the one nearest Ricks. He had the feeling that young man would be needing his hand held in just a few minutes.

HARVEY Ricks was not a crybaby. Way back in grammar school, he was known as the kid who couldn't be made to cry. A lot of the other kids tried it, and some of them were pretty ingenious, but no one ever succeeded. Harvey Ricks was not a crybaby.

He didn't cry when he flunked out of MIT, either, in the first semester of his sophomore year. He wanted to, God knows, but he didn't. He simply packed his gear and went on home, and spent six months thinking it over. Until the MIT fiasco, schoolwork had always come readily to him. He'd never had to do much studying, and so he'd never learned the methods or picked up the habit. He'd managed to breeze through his secondary schooling with natural intelligence and smooth glibness, and he'd tried the same technique at college. It hadn't worked.

During those six months at home, he'd learned *why* it hadn't worked. He still had his textbooks, and he spent a lot of time with them, not so much out of a desire to learn as out of a nostalgia for the school that had rejected him. Gradually he began to see where he'd gone wrong. He was at a level of learning now where natural intuition and glibness weren't enough. There were facts and concepts and relationships in those textbooks that he just couldn't pick up in a rapid glossing of the subject matter, and there were other things in the textbooks that he couldn't even understand until he had a

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sure grip on the earlier work.

Six months of brain-beating in his own home finally did for him what thirteen years of formal schooling had not done; it taught him *how* to study, and it taught him *why* to study. At the end of that time, he was accepted by a lesser engineering school in the northeastern United States, and this time he did it right.

In this second school, however, he was known as the boy who'd flunked out of MIT. It was much the same as his reputation for non-crying in childhood. He hadn't really wanted, then, to be known as the boy who wouldn't cry—all he'd really wanted was for people not to try to make him cry. But he hadn't known how to manage that, and so he'd built up a brittle sort of bravado, a challenging attitude that was actually only the other side of the crying coin.

The bravado was still his only defense when he was known as the boy who'd flunked out of MIT. His whole attitude seemed to say, "So what? I'm still a smarter better engineer than all the rest of you clods combined, and that goes for you fourth-rate teachers, too." As a result, he had plenty of time for studying. No one at school was particularly anxious for his company.

The funny part of it was that he was right. As a child, the other kids *couldn't* make him cry. As an engineering student, he *was* better than anyone else in his class. After two semesters, with a string of 'A' marks to his credit, he re-applied at MIT and was accepted on a probationary basis. He graduated seventh in his class—held back only by his poor freshman marks—and was immediately snapped up by Interplanetal Business Machines.

Interplanetal ran him through the normal engineer trainee courses, familiarizing him with the company's line of equipment. He sailed through, fascinated by this actual concrete usage of what had been only theoretical knowledge at school, and since he finished first in his class he was given his choice of geographical area of assignment.

By now, bravado was an ingrained characteristic of Harvey Ricks. Interplanetal maintained a Moon Division, which built computers and office equipment for lease to the other Moon industries, and all personnel there were volunteers on a two-year contract. It was inevitable that Harvey Ricks would volunteer.

THROUGHOUT his life, bravado had made him do what he could but didn't want to do. He *could* hold the tears back, though he didn't want to have to, and his attitude had forced him to prove it, time and time again. He *could* buckle down and study, though

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he'd have preferred to loaf, and his own challenge to his classmates had forced him to do it. He *could* spend two years on the Moon, though he would much rather have lived that time in New York or San Jose, and so here he was on his way to the Moon.

He tried to stop himself from being such a wise guy, but he always failed. Before he knew what was happening, he'd have his mouth wide open and his foot in it up to the knee. Like with this Cargomaster, Blair. He hadn't *wanted* to bait the man, he hadn't wanted to show off and act the smart-aleck, but he'd done it just the same. If, at any time in the next month of the journey, he felt himself slipping, he'd have no one to stiffen his backbone for him but himself. If he'd only kept his mouth shut and minded his own business, he could have relaxed, knowing that an older and wiser hand was always there, ready and willing to help him keep his balance. This way, as usual, he had put himself in the position where he had to rely totally on himself.

Lying face down in the bunk, chin on the squarish foam-rubber pillow, he eyed the three lights in front of him grimly and silently cursed himself for forty-seven kinds of fool. He was the reverse of the boy who cried wolf too much. He cried wolf too seldom. One of these days he would send all the hunters away and a wolf would come along too big for him to handle by himself. That day, Harvey Ricks would have his reckoning.

He wondered if the day was coming sometime in the next month.

The orange light flashed on.

Behind him, the voice of the Cargomaster came softly, talking to them all. "You fellows take it easy now," he was saying. "Breathe deep and slow. Don't get all tensed up. Don't hold on to those handles so tight you bunch your shoulder muscles all up. Don't try to kick those foot bars right off the bunks. Just relax. If you tense your bodies all up, you'll take a lot worse licking than if you just lie easy. You can get yourselves a broken bone just by being too tense when we blast. Inhale slow and easy, now. Exhale slow and easy. Just keep a light grip on the handles, lie easy and relaxed, like you were going to doze off in a minute."

The voice droned softly in the small room, and Ricks knew the man was trying to relax them just by the sound of his voice. But for Ricks, with his perverse bravado, it had just the opposite effect. His body kept tensing up and tensing up, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. His hands, gripping the chrome-plated handles as though they

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would snap them in two, were sweating already, and his shoulders were aching with strain. His feet pushed so hard against the bar that his knees were completely off the bunk.

I'm going to panic, he thought, *I'm going to scream. I'm going to jump up off this bunk and get myself killed when we blast.*

Only shame kept him in the bunk, only shame kept the scream unsounded in his throat. He had acted the bigshot with the Cargomaster, acted the know-it-all. He *couldn't* give in, he *couldn't* turn around and show himself a phony and a weakling.

The red light flicked on.

Sweat ribboned down his face. The back of his shirt clung to him, soaked through with perspiration. His collar was too tight, cutting off air, and his belt buckle was grinding into his middle.

He pushed his chin down into the pillow, and stared at the red light. He had to swallow, his mouth was full of saliva. But he was afraid to. If he was swallowing when the blast came, he could strangle. That had happened in the past, more than once. Perspiration stung his eyes, but he was afraid to blink. He had to keep staring at the red light, staring at the red light.

A heavy iron press slammed into his back, grinding him down into the bunk, stomping his feet down off the bar, shoving his face into the pillow. His mouth was full of saliva, dribbling out now between his lips, staining the pillow, mixing with his perspiration. The bunched muscles of his shoulders whined in agony, and his hands, numb now, slipped from the handles and lay limp, fingers curled, before his eyes.

THE red light was still on, waving and changing as he tried to keep watching it. His eyes burned and, despite himself, the lids came down, as though weighted with heavy magnets.

With closed eyes came nausea. He had no equilibrium any more, no balance. There was no longer any up or down, there was only himself, crushed between the bunk and the heavy iron press.

He held his breath, closed his throat, kept it down. Breakfast swirled and lumped in his stomach, wanting to come up, but he kept it down. He couldn't have it, he couldn't stand it, to have the Cargomaster see him lying in his own sickness. He kept it down.

The iron press went away, with a suddenness that terrified him. He could breathe again, he could swallow, he could move his arms and legs, he could wipe the sweat out of his eyes and look at the blessed green light.

The Cargomaster was on his

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feet in the middle of the room, by the ladder, saying, "Okay, fellows, that's it for a while. We'll be at a steady one-G for a while now. There'll be another little jolt in maybe twenty minutes, when we come into phase with the Station. In the meantime, you all can rest easy."

One of the other two, Standish, said timidly, "Excuse me, are there any—do you have any, uh, bags?"

"Sure thing. Right in that little slot under the light panel."

"Thank you."

"Don't feel bad. You haven't really been initiated into space till you've lost at least one meal. How are you other two doing?"

"Okay, I guess," said Miller, the third one.

"Fine. And you, Ricks?"

"I'm doing just lovely. This is a great little old roller-coaster you've got here."

Blair grinned. "I thought you'd like it," he said.

Harvey Ricks had proved himself again.

STATION One was leaving perigee, hurtling around the Earth on the long elliptical curve that would take it, fifteen days from now, eighty-four thousand miles towards the Moon. The lighter came curving up from Earth into the path of the Station's orbit and fifty miles ahead. As the Station overtook it, it slowly increased its speed, until the two were neck-and-neck. Slowly, the lighter pilot maneuvered his ship closer to the station, until the magnetic grapples caught, holding the ship to the curving grid jutting out from the hatchway in the high center of the doughnut. A closed companionway slid out along the grid, attached itself to the airlock in the side of the lighter, and formed a hermetic seal. The lock was open, and the Station cargo handlers came aboard for the unloading.

The seven aluminum crates of the cargo for QB were stacked on a powered cart, driven across the companionway to the Station proper, and taken by elevator down two levels, thence down one of the three interior corridors to the outer ring, and were finally stowed in Section Five, with the rest of the shipment.

Glenn Blair and the Station Manager, Irv Mendel, oversaw the unloading, making the appropriate row of checkmarks as each item was transferred from lighter to station. Blair then went back up and got the three engineers, all of whom seemed a little shaken by this first stage of the journey, though Ricks was doing his best to hide it. "Don't worry," Blair assured them, "the worst part of the trip is done with. From now on, it's quarter-G all the way."

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Standish, who had so far been sick twice and who was now holding tight to the nearest support as though afraid he might float up and out of sight any minute, grinned weakly and said, "I don't know which is worse, too much gravity or too little. Do people really get used to this?"

"In a couple of days," Blair told him, "you'll be running around as happy as a feather in an updraft. Once you get used to it, there's nothing in the universe as much fun as weighing only one-quarter what you're used to."

"I hope I get used to it soon," said Standish, "before I starve to death."

Blair led the way down the ladder and through the companionway to the Station. The three passengers were introduced to Irv Mendel, who told them how much they'd enjoy quarter-G in a couple days, and then they were shown their cubicles, in Section One, which would be their home for the next fifteen days. Their luggage—thirty-eight pounds permissable—had preceded them into the rooms, which were small but functional. There was, in each room, a bed and a chair and a small writing table, a lamp and a narrow closet and a tiny bathroom complete with shower stall and WC. The floor was uncarpeted black plastic and the walls and ceiling were cream-painted metal. It took the engineers a while to get used to the idea that the floor was *not* what they would have thought of as the 'bottom' of the Station from the outside. The floor of their cubicles was, on the outside, the outer edge of the Station. The center of the Station was not to the left or right, it was directly overhead.

The outer ring of the Station was divided into twelve sections. Sections Nine, Ten and Eleven housed the permanent Station personnel, including the weathermen and television relay men and so on. Sections Five, Six and Seven were cargo holds, and Sections One, Two and Three were transient quarters. (The three engineers were in Section Two.) Sections Four, Eight and Twelve contained the ultilities, the sources of light and heat and air, as well as the chow hall and food storage. At the bulkhead separating each Section, floor and ceiling met at an angle of thirty degrees. A man could do a loop-the-loop simply by walking dead ahead down the main corridor until he came back to his starting point.

Once the three engineers were safely settled in their cubicles, Blair took the elevator back up to the center of the Station, where Irv Mendel was waiting for him in his office. Blair went through the same sort of paperwork as he'd done with Cy Brad-

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dock, and when they were finished Mendel said, "How are these three kids? Going to give us any trouble?"

"I'm not sure. Standish has a pretty weak stomach, it may take him a while to get adjusted, but I think he'll just grin and bear it. Miller's all right. I'm not too sure about Ricks. He's pushing himself a little hard, one of these guys who wants to be an old salt before he ever gets into the water. If he cracks, he may do it in style."

Mendel leaned back in his chair, arms behind his head. "You know," he said, "when I was a kid, all I ever wanted was to get out here in space. I grew up reading about Moon-shots and orbiting satellites and I thought, 'By Golly, there's the frontier of tomorrow. There's where the adventurers are going to be, the explorers and the prospectors and the soldiers of fortune. That's the place for me, boy.' Romance and adventure, that's the way I saw it." He grinned and shook his head. "I forgot all about the twentieth century's most significant invention: Red tape. It never even occurred to me that space would be a job like this. Paperwork all over the place, schedules to meet and financial reports to make out, young fuzzy-faced kids to be nursemaided. It never even occurred to me."

"If you hate it so much," Blair told him, "why not go on back to Earth?"

"Are you kidding? Do you know what I weigh down there? Two hundred and fourteen pounds. Maybe more by now, I'm not sure. Besides, it's even worse down there. Paperwork up to your nose. It's only half that high up here. If you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean. Lighter gone?"

"Long gone. Halfway back to Earth by now. Left while you were with your Boy Scouts."

"So we're on our way again." Blair got lazily to his feet, and stretched. "After a couple days on Earth," he said, "quarter-G feels like a good quiet drunk. Think I'll go lie down in the rack and think about philosophy. See you later."

"Right. Hey, by the way."

Blair turned at the door. "By what way?"

"This is your last round trip, isn't it? Your two years are up."

"It was up last trip. I re-contracted."

Mendel grinned. "Member of the club now, huh? I thought you'd do that. Welcome aboard."

Blair shrugged self-consciously. "You know how it is," he said. "Every time I go back, Earth gets a little heavier. Besides, I like the soft life."

"You want it *really* soft," Men-

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del told him, "you put in for station duty. All we do is float around and around, draw our pay, and look at the pretty scenery."

"If that boy Ricks blows up," Blair said, "we'll *both* have plenty to do. I'm going to rack out, I'll see you later."

"See you, nursemaid."

Blair took the elevator down to the outer ring, and went to his cubicle in Section Two, next to the one occupied by Ricks, across the corridor from Standish and Miller. He stretched out on his bed and half-dozed, as his body gradually got reoriented to quarter-gravity.

Twenty minutes later, the meteor hit.

IT SHOULD never have happened. The Station had full radar vision, and so the meteor should have been seen long before it struck. The Station was powered, and should have been able to goose itself out of the meteor's path. So it should never have happened. But it did.

It was one of those million-to-one shots. The meteor, a chunk of space-rock about six feet in diameter, had come boiling across the Solar System, past the sun and the two innermost planets, headed on a near-collision course with Earth. It had actually dipped into the Earth's atmosphere, which slowed it somewhat, but not enough for it to be captured by Earth's gravity. It had shot out of the atmosphere again, moving more slowly than before, now redhot from atmospheric friction, and shortly thereafter it plowed into the Space Station from behind.

From the moment it had first become a potential danger to the Station, it had been unseeable. It was directly between the Station and the massive ball of Earth. It was the one thin segment of space where the radar's vision was unclear, and it was out of that segment that the juggernaut had come.

The impact could have been worse. In the first place, the meteor was not now traveling at its normal top speed. In the second place, the meteor and the Station were traveling in approximately the same direction, so that the Station, in effect, rolled with the punch. The space-rock broke through the outer hull. Whether or not it penetrated the inner hull no one was immediately sure.

The strike was in Section Five, containing the cargo, with it the seven aluminum crates for QB. At the instant of impact, even before the meteor had ground to a halt, an alarm bell rang in Section Five. The bell meant that the bulkhead doors to that section would be closed in ten seconds.

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There was only one person in Section Five at the time, a crewman named Gilmore, who'd been checking the security of the lashings on the cargo. Constant strike drills had made his reaction immediate and instinctive: he ran for the nearest door. He made it, too, all but his left shoe. The bulkhead door neatly snicked off the heel of the shoe as it slammed across the doorway and sealed shut. Gilmore's shoe was ruined and his sock slightly grazed, but his foot was untouched.

Throughout the rest of the Station, another bell was ringing, this one with a deeper tone and a two-beat rhythm. Harvey Ricks heard it and leaped up from his bunk, forgetting the discomfort that hadn't yet abated, despite the cheery words of the Cargomaster and the Station Manager. The bell rang on, and Ricks stood quivering in his cubicle, body tensed for fight or flight, mind bewildered and frightened.

The cubicle door jolted open and Blair's face stuck in long enough for him to shout, "Suit up! It's under your bunk!" Then he was gone again, and Ricks heard him delivering the same call to Standish and Miller, across the corridor.

Ricks, incredibly grateful for any excuse to be in motion, lunged across the cubicle toward his bunk. He misjudged the force of his leap, with the lesser gravity, and tumbled head over heels across the bunk and into the metal wall. He lay crouched on the bunk, gripping his knees, and whispered desperately to himself, "Take it easy, take it easy, take it e asy."

When he could move without trembling, he got to his feet and dragged the spacesuit out from under the bunk. In the company course, preparatory to leaving on this trip, he'd learned how to don a spacesuit, and he clambered rapidly into this one, closing the inner and outer zippers, and then searched under the bunk again and dragged out the helmet. As he got to his feet, the bell stopped.

RICKS bit down hard on his lower lip, willing himself to be calm. Carefully, he donned the helmet and went through the series of safety checks he'd been taught. Faceplate open, he put his fingers to the row of buttons at the suit's waist. First finger, left hand; helmet lamp: It worked, he could see it shining against the opposite wall. Click off. First finger, right hand; air intake: It worked, he could hear the faint hissing below his right ear. Cautiously, he closed the faceplate and inhaled. The oxygen mixture was rich, but good. Click off, faceplate open. Second finger, left

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hand; heat unit: It worked, he could immediately feel the suit warming against his legs and arms. Click off. Second finger, right hand; water intake: It worked, a thin dribble of lukewarm water emerged from the tube in the corner of his mouth. Click off.

So far, so good. He hunched his left shoulder forward, and read the small dials there: Oxygen tanks, full. Water tank, half full. Battery, fully charged. Temperature inside the suit, sixty-eight degrees.

Was the air in the cubicle getting foul? Ricks snapped the faceplate shut, pushed the air intake button. This air was cleaner, he was sure of it.

Where were the others? Where was Blair? He couldn't hear a sound. The suit cut out all external atmosphere, but not all external sound. He reached up under the helmet chin and switched on the suit radio. A faint crackling of static told him it was on, but other than that there was no sound.

He looked around the cubicle. Was there any air in it now? He could be standing in total vacuum, there was no way to be sure. He could be the only one still alive in the Station.

"Blair?" His own voice, confined within the helmet, sounded harsh and croaking in his ears. The radio gave no answer.

Unwillingly, he moved toward the door. In here, the sound of his pounding heart was magnified, frightening him more than the radio's silence or the thought that the Station might now be airless. He pushed open the door, and saw Blair standing in the corridor, wearing his spacesuit but holding the helmet casually in his left hand.

Blair looked at him and grimaced, then motioned for Ricks to open his faceplate. Ricks reached up, switched off the radio, and removed his helmet. He managed a grin. "Kind of nice in here," he said. "Set up a bar, put a couple of chairs around, it could be real liveable." But he heard the tremor in his voice, and he knew that Blair heard it, too.

Blair said, "Get on down by the elevator with Standish and Miller. If you hear another bell, a few notes lower than the first one, with a triple-beep in it, clap the helmet on. Otherwise, keep it off. You don't have canned air to waste."

"Watch for the triple beep," said Ricks jauntily. "Aye aye, sir."

Blair grunted, and turned away, heading down the corridor in the opposite direction. Ricks watched him go, glaring at his back. 'I'm a better man than you, Harvey Ricks,' said that back. 'You'll break down, you'll flunk

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my course, you'll never match me or even come close."

Blair disappeared, through the bulkhead doorway to Section Three, and Ricks turned the other way, walking down the corridor and right to the elevator. Standish and Miller were standing their, helmets on but faceplates open, and Ricks felt somewhat better. *His* helmet was in his hand.

As he came up to them, Standish said, "What do you suppose it is?" His pale face was even paler now, his large eyes larger.

Ricks shrugged. "It's probably just a drill. Get us new boys all lathered up, just in case we weren't taking it all seriously."

"I thought I felt a tremor just before the bell started," said Miller. "We may have been hit by a meteor or some such thing."

Ricks shrugged again. "Whatever it was, it doesn't seem very urgent. Did Papa Blair tell you two about the triple-beep?"

"Sure," said Miller. "He was sore at you, because you were late getting out in the hall."

"I was running my suit-check," said Ricks easily.

"Omigosh!" cried Standish. "I forgot!" He started the check, right then and there.

Watching Standish run through his suit-check, Ricks felt a *lot* better. *He* hadn't forgotten.

BLAIR found Mendel at the sealed bulkhead between Sections Four and Five. Mendel waved to him and grinned sourly. "I thought you'd be along," he said.

"What is it? The cargo section?"

"Right through there, boy. Sorry. We've had a meteor strike. Son of a gun came at us on the blind side."

Blair glanced quickly at the gauges beside the bulkhead door. "Pressure's up," he said. "Looks like it didn't break all the way through."

"No way to tell yet," said Mendel. "It might be a slow leakage."

"Then we have time to move the cargo."

Mendel shook his head. "Sorry, Glenn, no can do. Open this door here, it might joggle the air pressure just enough to make a slow leak a fast one. If that happens, it won't be this door that slams shut, it'll be the one way over there, between Three and Four."

"So you wait in Three. I'm willing to take the chance."

"I'm not. And it isn't your pearly white skin I'm worried about, it's my pearly white Station. If we have one Section in vacuum, we'll have trouble enough keeping equilibrium. With two Sections out of whack, we'll wobble all over the damn Solar System."

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"Irv, my whole cargo's in there! The cargo for QB is in there!"

"I can't help it. Besides, vacuum won't hurt that stuff for QB".

"Irv, if there's a break through the inner hull, and that meteor shakes loose, the QB cargo won't be *in* the Station any more, it'll be scattered halfway from here to Mars. Did you ever see stuff come flying out of a room that goes suddenly to vacuum?"

"Yes, I did. Did you ever see a *man* that's gone suddenly to vacuum?"

"Irv, look at your blasted pressure gauge!"

"It's down."

"It's down less than half a point, Irv, and that's because you've stopped pumping air in there. Listen, that QB cargo isn't hermetically sealed. If it doesn't get good air, it can rot."

"It can rot right now, for all of me. I'm not touching Section Five or anything in it. We'll get in touch with QB, and let them send a couple of reeps up here. It's their job, not ours."

"Irv, don't you realize what that cargo means to the boys at QB?"

"Sure, I do. But do *you* realize what this Station here means to *me?* The boys at QB can re-order another batch. I can't go out and re-order another Station."

"Irv, listen. The ground-pounders don't realize how important that stuff is. Without it, the crew at QB will be at each other's throats in a month. This is no exaggeration, Irv, the whole QB operation will fall apart within a month. And if QB falls apart, the whole system falls apart, because it's QB's job to run maintenance for the rest of us."

"I know that," said Mendel, "I know it well. Every word you say is absolutely true. But I still say they can re-order."

"And *I* say it'll take three months at the very least to fill the new order! We can't even put the order in until we can prove to the ground-pounders' satisfaction that this batch is destroyed, and we won't be able to do that till the reeps get here and patch the hole. So that's ten or fifteen days right there. Then they'll fool around another half a month or more, figuring out costs and tax breaks and whatnot, wanting to know why QB can't make do till the next regular shipment, and bogging down in a lot of red tape. Then they have to put the order in, out of sequence, so it'll take longer to fill it. And every single item has to be double-checked and approved by the psycho department and half a dozen other departments. It'll be *more* than three months!"

Mendel doggedly shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with you, Glenn," he said, "I'm going to tell you. That cargo is

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your responsibility, but this whole Station is mine, and I'm not going to risk this Station for you or QB or anybody. Period, finish, end of discussion. Now, I'm going to go on up and call QB and have them send us a couple of reeps. Want to come along?"

"I want to boot you in the rump, Irv, I swear."

Mendel grinned. "I feel like doing some rump-booting myself. Take it easy, Glenn. It'll all work out."

"Hot diggity," said Blair sourly.

"Want to come up to the office with me?"

"No."

"Suit yourself."

Mendel left, and Blair stomped angrily back down the corridor to Section Two, where he found the three engineers still waiting by the elevator. He glared at them and snarled, "What the devil are you clowns doing? Get out of those idiot clown suits, the party's over."

The three of them stared at him in astonishment. Ricks looked as though he might smart-talk, and Blair waited hopefully, fists clenched, but something about his stance gave Ricks second thoughts and he turned away without a word, red-faced and frowning.

QB was the Quartermaster Base, a large satellite in permanent orbit two hundred miles above the surface of the Moon. It was shaped somewhat like the three Space Stations, though with a thicker outer ring and a less intricate inner section. This base held all of the equipment for maintenance and repair of the entire General Transit system, the three Space Stations, the two barbells, and the Moon-based lighters.

Attached to QB by a simple hook-and-ring mechanism were six repair ships, familiarly known as Reeps. Reeps were small blunt rounded one-man ships, with payloads made up exclusively of fuel. Protruding from the front of each reep were four jointed arms, operated by the arms and legs of the pilot. The reep had one large rocket exhaust at the rear, which swiveled to allow turning maneuverability, and four small swivelled exhausts around the body, permitting the reep complete close-range maneuverability. An experienced reep pilot could operate his ship as though it were an extension of his body, backing and sidestepping, working the four arms as readily as he used his own arms and legs.

There were two kinds of reeps, and three of each kind. There was the gripper reep, with arms designed for holding and manipulating, and the fixer reep, with arms for welding and cutting.

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When the call came in from Station One, QB was three-quarters around the Earth-side of its orbit. The radioman on duty got the approximate dimensions of the meteor now jammed into the outer edge of the Station, and its approximate placement, and passed this information on to the Dispatcher Office. A call then went down to the Supply Department for Part X-102-W, outer hull replacement panel. This piece, eight feet by eight, was delivered to the Dispatch Delivery Point, at the inner rim of the doughnut.

Meanwhile, fixer reep 2 and gripper reep 5 were fueled and piloted. Spacesuited QB crewmen put the replacement panel in position for the gripper reep to get hold of, and the two ships broke away from the satellite, headed toward Earth.

The radioman at QB got in touch with the radioman at Station One and told him to expect the two reeps in fourteen days, approximately twelve hours before the Station was scheduled to make contact with the barbell from Station Three.

For everyone concerned, it was a long fourteen days. Irv Mendel watched the air pressure creep downward in Section Five, and gnawed his lower lip. Glenn Blair thought of the cargo for QB, and snarled at everyone he saw. Harvey Ricks thought of his two moments of panic, and waited for the chance to shove Blair's superior attitude down his stinking throat.

TIME in space is arbitrary. There are no seasons in the gulf between the planets, and there is no day and night. The sun, incredibly bright and fierce when seen without the protection of miles of atmosphere, glares out eternally at its domain, heating whatever it touches, leaving to frigid cold whatever lies in shadow. The twenty-four hour day is a fact of Earth, not a fact of the universe. In the void between the planets, the day is singular, and will end only with the death of the sun.

No matter how much he wills it otherwise, Man is a parochial creature, a native of a planet and not of all space. Whatever else he leaves behind him when he roves beyond his own globe, he takes with him his ingrained ideas of night and day. In every room and office of Space Station One there was a clock, and every clock pointed simultaneously to exactly the same time. The time was that of the Greenwich Meridian, the time of England and Ireland and Scotland and Wales. When Big Ben tolled twelve o'clock noon, the spacefarers of Station One ate lunch. When Big Ben, thousands of miles away in London, struck twelve o'clock

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midnight, the spacemen obediently went to bed.

The reeps arrived at four twenty-two p.m., the fourteenth day out from Earth. The gripper reep, still clutching replacement part X-102-W, slid into a soft elliptical orbit around the Station. The fixer reep closed gently against the personnel hatch grid. Spacesuited crewmen fastened it to the grid by metal lines through the two rings, one at the reep's top toward the rear and the other at the bottom near the front. The reep pilot pumped the cabin air into the storage tank, adjusted his helmet, and opened the magnetically-sealed clear plastic cockpit dome. A Station crewman helped him out onto the grid, and escorted him inside for a conference with Irv Mendel and Blair.

Mendel greeted him at his office doorway, hand out-thrust. "Welcome aboard. Irv Mendel."

The pilot grinned and took the proferred hand. "Ed Wiley," he said. He nodded to Blair. "How's it going, Glenn?"

"Lousy," Blair told him. "Did you see the strike?"

"Yeah, it's a nice one, a real boulder. Which section is that?"

"Five," said Mendel. "Glenn's cargo is in there, that's why he's so peeved."

"It's QB's cargo," snapped Blair, "not mine."

Wiley frowned. "Ours? How so?"

Mendel explained, "Your six-months' goodies are in there."

"Oh, fine. In what condition?"

Blair said, "This fat character here won't let me in to find out. The whole section's at half-pressure by now."

"Then he's right," said Wiley. "I hate to admit it, but he's right. Double the pressure all at once, you're liable to knock the meteor right out of the hole. If pressure's going down that slow right now, it means the meteor's partially plugging the leak."

"And what happens when you guys yank the meteor out? Same difference."

"Not the same," said Mendel. "This way, nobody gets killed."

Blair shrugged angrily.

Wiley said, "Maybe we can work something. Vacuum won't hurt the goodies, will it?"

"It may explode the cases," said Blair. "That shouldn't do too much damage. I'm worried about it being flipped outside. The cases'll burst, and the whole shipment'll be scattered to hell-angone."

Wiley nodded. "We'll try to lower the pressure slow and easy. Have you cut off the air supply in that section?"

"First thing," said Mendel.

"Good. We'll need two guys on the outside to give us a hand. Do you want to, Glenn?"

"Damn right," said Blair. He got to his feet. "I'll suit up."

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Wiley stopped him at the door. "Don't worry, boy," he said. "Nobody's going to blame you if it goes wrong."

Blair studied him, then said, "Tell me, Ed. If that shipment doesn't get out to QB, will it be a very pleasant place to live the next few months."

Wiley returned his gaze a moment, then shook his head. "No, it won't. We'll have to hide the razor blades."

"How do you feel now, Ed?" pursued Blair. "Happy in your work, content with the job and the pay and the living conditions? How are you going to feel two months from now?"

"I know that, Glenn. Believe me, I know exactly what you mean. Don't forget, I *come* from QB. If there's any way at all to fix that strike and save the cargo, I'll do it."

"What do you figure your chances, Ed?"

"It's hard to say, before we get a closer look. Maybe fifty-fifty."

"If I open the Section Five door and go in there and get that cargo out, what are the chances of the meteor being knocked out? Fifty-fifty?"

"Less than that, Glenn. You've only got half-pressure in there, you tell me." Wiley patted his shoulder. "We'll work it out," he said.

"I'm glad to hear it."

BLAIR left the office and took the elevator down to Section Two and his cubicle. As he was getting into his suit, there was a knock at the door. He grunted, and Ricks came in.

The two had been avoiding each other for the last two weeks, Ricks more obviously than Blair. Whenever one entered a room—mess hall or library or whatever—the other immediately left. When they passed one another in a corridor, they looked straight ahead with no acknowledgment.

Ricks now looked truculent and determined. Blair grimaced at the sight of him and snapped, "All right, Ricks, what is it? I don't have time for hand-holding right now."

"You're going outside," said Ricks, "to help fix the strike. I want to go out with you."

"What? Go to hell!"

"You're going to need more than one man out there."

"We'll get an experienced crewman. You've never been outside in vacuum in your life. This isn't any training course."

"How did you do the first time, Blair? Did you make it?"

"You aren't me, sonny."

"I've been taking vitamins."

"If you want that chip knocked off your shoulder, you better try somewhere else. I'm liable to knock your head off with it."

"Try it afterwards, Superman. I'm a better man than you are

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every day in the week and twice on Sundays. Give me a chance to prove it."

"No."

Ricks grinned crookedly. "Okay, big man," he said. "It's your football, so you can choose up the sides."

He started toward the doorway and Blair growled, "Hold on a second." When Ricks turned, he said, "You're a grandstander, Ricks. You knew there wasn't a chance in a million I'd let you go outside with me, so it was a nice safe challenge, wasn't it?"

"Then call my bluff!"

Blair nodded. "I'm going to. Get into your suit. But just let me tell you something first. This isn't a game. If you flub, it counts. You're going to be living on the Moon for the next two years. That's a small community; everybody knows everybody else. If you flub, those are going to be two miserable years for you, sonny. You're going to be the boy who lost the cargo for QB, and nobody'll let you forget it."

Ricks' face was pale, but his grin sardonic. "All right, Cargomaster," he said. "I can handle that job, too. I can be your whipping boy." He spun around, and out of the cubicle.

Fists clenched tight, Blair glowered at the empty doorway.

Ricks nervously followed Blair and Wiley out through the personnel hatch and onto the grid outside the Station. His meeting with Wiley had been a simple exchange of names, with no questions asked and no explanations given. Apparently, Wiley had no idea he was merely a passenger on the Station, and not a crew member. Irv Mendel, on the other hand, had pointedly ignored him. Ricks got the impression that Mendel and Blair had argued about him, and that Mendel had lost. Blair himself simply looked grim.

It was the first time Ricks had seen the exterior of the Station. He was standing now on a grid extending from a semi-conical section which itself protruded upward from the ball in the middle of the Station. The ball contained the administrative and recreational rooms of the Station, and the cone above it contained the radio room, the control room, and cubicles containing the meteorological equipment of the weather team.

Standing on the grid, Ricks looked up and out, toward the stars, toward the vast emptinesses, and all at once he felt microscopic. He was as small as an ant beneath a redwood tree. Smaller than that, smaller than an amoeba in the ocean, smaller than a single grain of sand on the Sahara. He was a weak and tiny speck of fury and indecision, a flea riding a lily pad down the

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Mississippi. He could cry out, with all the strength of his lungs, and it would be no more than a faint peeping in the bottom of the deepest well of all.

Wiley's calm voice broke into his awe and wonder, crackling tinnily from the helmet radio: "We'll go on down and take a look at the damage first. It's the section just to the right of that spoke."

Blair's voice, oddly depersonalized by the radio, said, "Right. You lead off."

Wiley, calm and sure-footed in his magnet-soled boots, stepped off the grid onto the curving side of the cone. He marched down it, looking to Ricks like a man walking calmly down a wall, and thence across the bulge of the central ball to the spoke. Blair followed him, moving just as easily and effortlessly, and Ricks came last.

There was no gravity out here. The Station spun beneath them with what seemed lazy slowness against the distant backdrop of the stars, and the only gravitic force was the centrifugal action of the Station, trying lazily to spin them off and out into space. Above them, the gripper reep arced by in its orbit; the pilot waved.

Ricks gritted his teeth and followed the other two, imitating their actions. The magnetic boots were tricky things; you had to step high, or all at once the boot would click back against the Station with a step only half-completed. And it took a sliding knee-bending movement to release the boot for another step.

The three men moved in slow Indian file across the rounded bulk of the spoke, up across the first inner bulge of the rim, and then out on the rim's top. They stepped carefully over the metal ridge that marked where, inside the Station, Section Six was separated from Section Five. Then there was a four-foot drop to the curve of the outer surface of the rim. If the rim of the Station had been an automobile tire, they would now have been standing on its side, out on the edge where the tread begins. The meteor was imbedded in the tread-area itself, below the curve.

Wiley and Blair stood close to the meteor; Ricks hung back a step, watching them, moving only when and as they moved. No one had spoken since they left the grid. Then, over the earphones came an unfamiliar voice: "Hows it look, Ed?"

"Not sure yet, Dan. We're just beginning to look it over."

Ricks looked around, baffled, then realized that Dan was the pilot in the gripper reep, now hovering a little ways off, circling as the Station circled, keeping approximately even with the meteor break, the replace-

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ment part awkward in its long arms.

"Here it is, here," said Blair suddenly. He squatted carefully, keeping both boots firmly in contact with the Station metal, and pointed to a spot at the jagged intersection of rough meteor rock and frayed bent metal.

Ricks moved in closer, to see what Blair was pointing at. Sunlight glinted momentarily from whatever it was.

Wiley crouched down beside Blair, cutting off Ricks' view, as Dan asked, "What is it?"

It was Wiley who answered. "Little bit of ice here. We've got a slow leakage. Looks like there's probably a small puncture of the inner hull, with the meteor itself plugging it most of the way. Little bit of air gets out, dissipates between the hulls, and a smidgen of it gets out through here and freezes solid."

Blair's voice sounded, saying, "Does Dan know what's in this section?"

"I don't know a thing."

Wiley explained it, and Dan said, "We'll have to take it nice and easy, then. If that stuff gets loused up, I'm not going home."

Blair straightened, turning, and said, "Okay, Ricks, you can make yourself useful. Go on up with Wiley and help him unrig his ship."

"Sure."

BLAIR waited by the meteor while the other two went back across the spoke and up to the grid. Wiley said, "There's these two wires to disengage. Wait till I'm in and set, and I'll give you the highsign."

"Okay."

Wiley clambered into the reep, sealing the dome shut and adjusting the air pressure to fill the cabin. Then he turned off the suit's air supply and opened his faceplate. Hands and feet ready on the controls, he nodded to Ricks. Ricks released the moorings, and the reep drifted out and to the left, falling slowly away from the spinning Station. Its rear rocket flashed, and it moved away more rapidly, beyond the Station's outer rim.

Ricks walked back to the rim. When he got there, Wiley's ship was in place, two of the side rockets firing sporadically, keeping it still in relation to the motion of the Station. The two side arms clung to jagged tears in the rim metal, next to the meteor, while the top and bottom arms, working to the pre-measurements of a small computer tape, inched across the metal, cutting implements extended, scoring not deep enough to cut completely through the hull. Just behind each cutting edge, a small nozzle marked the line of the score with a thin line of red.

Finished, Wiley retracted all

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four arms, and allowed the reep to drift back away from the Station. The other reep came in closer.

Blair said, "Got something else for you to do, Ricks." He removed from a clip on the waist of his suit what looked like a coiled length of narrow cable. "You can hold the replacement panel," he said, "while Dan clears the meteor out. Help me unsnarl this thing."

"Right."

Unwound, the coil proved to be four lengths of cable, about fifteen feet long, joined together at one end and terminating at the other end in broad curved clips. While Dan hovered as close as he dared, Blair attached these clips to the edges of the panel, near the corners. Ricks held the other end, where the cables met.

"It's going to want to drift to the left," said Blair. "Make sure it doesn't. Keep all four cables taut. It's the same as flying a kite. If you let it dip, it'll crash into the rim here. If it's crumpled, we can't use it. And we don't have any spares handy."

"I'll keep it up," promised Ricks.

Dan backed the gripper reep until the cables stretched taut from Ricks to the panel, and then released his hold on the panel, which immediately drifted to the left, not maintaining the speed of the Station's spin.

Holding the joined part of the cable tight in his gloved left hand, Ricks tugged with his right at individual lines, trying to keep the panel above him. Behind him, Blair and Dan were ignoring him, working at their own part of the problem. Ricks could hear Blair instructing Dan, guiding him as he came slowly in and fastened his four gripper arms to the meteor. Two of the reep's auxiliary rocket exhausts fired briefly, and then again, as Dan tugged tentatively at the meteor.

Ricks wanted to turn and watch the operation, but he couldn't. The eight-by-eight replacement panel swayed above him with maddening slowness, inching away from him, curving down toward the Station. Trying to move too quickly, he pulled on the wrong cable, and the panel dipped sharply, the uppermost cable falling slack, threatening to snarl the others.

STEPPING back quickly, almost losing his boot-grip on the hull, Ricks yanked desperately at the slack cable. The panel shuddered, stopped perpendicular to the hull and scarcely two feet above its surface. Then the force of Ricks' yank took over, and it sailed slowly toward him, curving up and over him, moving now in the direction of the Station's spin but somewhat faster. When it was directly above him,

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Ricks tried to stop it, but it curved on, angling down now directly toward the meteor and the arms of the gripper reep.

This time, Ricks managed to tug the cables properly, reversing the drift without too much trouble. He was beginning to catch on to the method, now. It was impossible to keep the panel stationery above him. All he could do was keep sawing it back and forth, forcing its own sluggish motion to follow his commands. Once he had the right idea, it wasn't too difficult to keep the thing under control, but it didn't take long at all for his arms to feel the strain. He didn't dare relax, not for a second. His arms and shoulders twinged at every movement, and his neck and back ached from the necessity of his looking constantly directly above him.

From time to time, he chanced a quick look at the progress of the other two. Blair was standing now at the very edge of the scored section, guiding Dan both with words and with arm and body movements. Dan was tugging slowly, first to the left and then to the right, and gradually the meteor was being inched outward. At one point, Blair glanced over at Ricks and said, "How's it going, Ricks?"

"Just dandy," said Ricks, grunting with effort. "Just fine. Almost as good as you."

Blair frowned, then turned his attention back to the meteor. Half a dozen times since they'd come out here, he'd been at the point of telling Ricks to go back inside, to have Mendel send out a crewman instead. He wasn't sure what had stopped him. It wasn't the way Ricks saw it; he wasn't looking for a whipping boy, to take the blame for him if he lost the cargo. Glenn Blair didn't pass the buck, he never had and he never would. He'd been given this job in the first place because he was a man who could handle responsibility, whose pride lay in his ability to complete his own jobs, not in any ability to oversee the work of others.

He had, he knew, lost the dispassionate approach necessary in his work. Ricks and the cargo for QB had both become too important to him, though in far different ways. With Ricks, he seemed somehow to have become ensnarled in some idiotic sort of contest, in which only Ricks knew the rules and the scoring, in which only Ricks could know or care who had won and who had lost. Ricks had kept him off-balance, thinking with his emotions rather than his brains. In so doing, he'd underestimated Ricks' own concern with the contest. He'd agreed to let Ricks come out here partly out of a desire to throw the guy into a situation where he would lose his own con-

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test under his own rules, and partly out of a desire to call Ricks' bluff. It had turned out to be no bluff, and Blair, thinking with his emotions, had been unable to withdraw the agreement.

And the fight with Mendel had only served to harden the cement. Mendel had been instantly and loudly opposed to Ricks' going outside, and Blair had responded just as quickly and just as loudly. Mendel's opposition had finally only intensified Blair's determination to go through with it.

Outside, he had had no choice but to put Ricks to work. There were only the two of them out there, and both were needed. He'd kept for himself the intricate job of guiding the removal of the meteor—the reep pilot was too far back and too involved with the operation of his ship's controls to be able to do the job by himself—but that had left for Ricks the scarcely-less intricate job of holding onto the replacement panel. Blair had kept an eye on him throughout, ready to step in if it looked as though Ricks would lose control, but Ricks had done surprisingly well, after bobbling the ball a bit to begin with.

Now, as Blair kept up a steady drone of low-voiced directions, Dan gradually eased the meteor out of the jagged hole it had made in the hull. The whole scored segment was now bulged outward slightly, and the sawtooth edges of the hole were scraping out and back, with the motion of the meteor.

Then, all at once, the reep jerked backward. as the meteor rasped loose. The hull vibrated beneath Blair's feet, and then quieted.

Blair waited, cautiously watching the jagged tear, but after the second's vibration, there was nothing more. They'd managed it, working and tugging and twisting the meteor in such a way that the remaining air in Section Five was released slowly enough to be of no danger.

Dan's voice came over the helmet radio: "I'll take Junior on home."

"Right."

THE gripper reep shot, turning, up and away from the Station, carrying the meteor far enough away so that it could safely be released without being drawn right back to the Station. Blair watched it go, then stepped cautiously across the scored line and looked down through the hole at the inner hull, five feet away. It was too dark in there to be sure, but he thought he could see the marks of a tiny jagged tear.

Wiley's voice came through the earphones, saying, "Okay, Glenn, I'm ready to slice 'er up."

"Come ahead." He backed out

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of the scored section again, and watched as the fixer reep came in close, once again clutching the edges of the hole with the side arms while the other two arms carefully sliced through the scored lines, this time cutting all the way through, leaving only thin uncut segments at the corners to keep the whole piece in place.

As the fixer reep backed off, the gripper reep returned, empty-armed now, and slid into place, grabbing the serrated edges of the hole. Blair took the small powered hand-cutter from its loop at the waist of his suit, and carefully sliced through the remaining segments. The gripper reep backed away, holding the cut-off square.

Blair crouched at the edge of the cut, and held tightly to it as he lifted both boots clear of the hull. His body swung slowly around, over the hole, and he pulled himself down into it, until his boots clamped to the inner hull.

The space between the hulls was a maze of braces and supports, five feet wide. One diagonal brace had been crushed by the meteor, and would have to be replaced once both hulls were repaired. For now, Blair was concerned to affix a temporary patch to the outside of the inner hull. The final repair job on that would be done from inside the Station. All he had to do was put on a patch that would allow Section Five to be filled with air again, so the inner repair work could be safely done.

Once his boots were firmly braced against the inner hull, Blair released his hold on the outer hull and moved through the constricted space to the cross-braced wall between Section Five and Six. A tool-and-patch kit was bolted to the wall, beside the round small entranceway to the between-hulls of Section Six. From this kit Blair took a small hammer and a foot-square rubberized metallic patch. He then returned to the spot where the meteor had broken through.

The hole in the inner hull was a ragged oval, less than half an inch in diameter at its widest point. The edges of the tear had been pulled outward by the removal of the meteor, and Blair first hammered these flat, then removed the protective backing of the patch square and pressed the square firmly over the hole. Its inner side was covered with a sealant designed to work in vacuum, binding patch and hull together at the molecular level. It was not a permanent repair job by any means, but it would hold for at least twenty-four hours of normal pressure inside Section Five.

The patch job finished, Blair came back out in much the same

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manner as he had gone in. Ricks, a little ways to the left, was still maneuvering the replacement panel back and forth, though his arms seemed to be sagging somewhat by now. Blair said, "Okay, Ricks, bring it in."

"Anything you say, Admiral."

Blair helped him ease the panel down close enough for each of them to grab an edge. They released the cable clips, and Blair one-handed bunched the cable together until he could slip it back onto the catch on his suit. Together, they turned the panel around and held it flat. On Earth, this reinforced thickness of hull would have weighed nearly two hundred pounds. Here, it seemed to weigh less than nothing, since the only force on it was trying to push it *up*, away from the Station.

They carried the panel over to the hole made for it, and Blair said, "Lower it easy. It should be a snug fit, flush with the rest of the hull. If we set it in flat, we won't have any trouble."

"No trouble at all, Commander."

"Don't play the smart-aleck!"

Surprisingly, Ricks answer was subdued: "All right. What do we do now?"

"Lower it. Don't hold it on the edge, hold your hands flat on the top, like this. There's no danger of it falling."

Ricks laughed nervously. "It's like a table-raising at a seance."

They stood on opposite sides of the hole, the panel flat between them, their arms out over it, gloved hands pressing it slowly down. The fixer reep rolled gently in toward them, and Wiley said, "Let me know when you're ready, Glenn."

"Just a minute now."

The panel was a little too far over on Ricks' side. Together, they adjusted it, and lowered it to match the hole. They stood crouched opposite one another, holding the panel in place, while the fixer reep edged into position, and the welding arm reached out to the bottom left corner. "Turn your face away, Ricks," warned Blair.

"Right."

IT TOOK ten minutes to weld the new piece into place. In the meantime, the gripper reep returned from dumping the scrap section, and Blair sent Ricks up to the grid to help Dan moor his ship. Ricks and Dan came back carrying two tool kits and, when the welding job was finished, Blair and Ricks stood aside as Dan power-sanded the new weld and did a quick spray-painting that removed the signs of the patch. Straightening, he said, "There you go. Good as new."

"Fine," said Blair. "Let's see how the cargo made out."

The three men returned to the

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grid, where they moored Wiley's ship across from Dan's, and then the four of them went on back inside the Station.

Mendel was waiting for them inside the lock, brow furrowed with worry. He glanced back and forth from Blair to Ricks, then said to Blair, "How did it go?"

"Fine."

"Just peachy," said Ricks. "I get my merit badge, don't I, Cargomaster?"

Blair shook his head at Mendel, and went on toward the elevator without answering Ricks.

He headed immediately for Section Five. Three crewmen were already at the bulkhead, which was still sealed shut. Blair looked at the pressure gauge, and saw that the dial was above the halfway mark and noticeably climbing. He talked with the crewmen a few minutes, discussing the strike and its repairing, and then at last the bulkhead door slid back into its recess, and they went on in. The crewmen went to work on the permanent repair of the inner hull, and Blair checked his cargo. A few of the food cartons had exploded when the section had gone to vacuum, but he gave them hardly a glance. He found the seven aluminum crates for QB. All had split open, releasing interior air, but their contents looked to be still in good condition. Blair grinned to himself with relief.

QB was the maintenance base. As such, it had a permanent crew of eighty-four men. These men were on thirty-minute call at all times, and were fulfilling a two-year contract with General Transists. They spent every moment of those two years inside the QB satellite. Most of the time, they had little work to do, but the size of the crew was the statistical minimum required for any foreseeable accident to any part of the General Transits lifeline between the Earth and the Moon. When there was any sort of breakdown, such as this meteor strike on Station One, they went to work. The rest of the time, they were completely on their own. Their world, for two years, was a small metal ring nearly a quarter million miles from home. They couldn't leave it, and they had little to do inside it.

That was why the contents of the seven aluminum crates was so important. Four cartons of motion picture film and three cartons of microfilmed books. Six months of entertainment, of distraction. The only way the men of QB could keep from going stir-crazy in their two years of self-imposed imprisonment, the only way to last through the inactive days and weeks between the infrequent calls for their skills and labor.

With no books, no motion pictures, no cheerful distractions

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for their minds, the men of QB would falter. Irritations would mount, squabbles would turn to hatreds, aggravations to bloody vendettas. Efficiency would collapse, morale disappear. Statistically, there would be within the first sixty days five suicides and eight murders.

Entertainment. Tinsel. But, to the men of QB, as vital as food.

Glenn Blair patted the aluminum crates, and grinned with relief.

NOW that it was over, Harvey Ricks was terrified. Before he'd gone out, he'd been too full of the challenge he'd hurled at Blair; while he'd been outside, he'd been too busy. Now it was over, and he had time to realize the extent of the risks he'd taken, and he was terrified.

He spent the next four hours in his cubicle, staring at the wall, vowing great resolutions of reform. From now on, he would mind his own business, accept his limitations.

Then, after four hours, the barbell arrived from Station Three, and the transfer of cargo and passengers was made. There were five men coming back to Earth, there was stack after stack of cargo. The huge hold of the barbell was emptied, and then the shipment for the Moon—and the cargo for QB—was loaded aboard, and the three passengers for the Moon left Station One, carrying their one-suitcase-each to the new cubicle, where they would live another fifteen days of their lives. Ricks looked around at the new room, and already the retroactive terror was receding, already he was thinking of his exploit in self-congratulatory terms. He'd done well. He'd showed the Cargomaster that Harvey Ricks was a good man to have at your side, a man who can do the job right the first time.

After a while, Blair knocked at the cubicle door and entered, smiling hesitantly, saying, "I didn't get a chance to thank you, Ricks. You did a good job out there."

Ricks smiled, the old self-confident challenging smile. "Why, any time, Cargomaster."

Blair's face tightened. "Well," he said. "So I've thanked you."

"So you have, Cargomaster."

Blair left without another word.

Ricks settled back on his bunk, arms behind his head, and smiled at the ceiling. He'd made it again. He'd sent the hunters away, and when the wolf had come he'd tromped it all on his own. He still hadn't run across the wolf he couldn't handle.

But there was time. There was still plenty of time for Harvey Ricks to have his reckoning.

Two years' worth. **THE END**

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Don't breathe a word to the trade . . . they'd steal it before you could say 'Art Linkletter' . . . but here's the hottest new idea in video . . . just think of that curtain rising, the camera eye going to red, and the man saying, ever so dignified:

THIS IS YOUR DEATH

By ALBERT TEICHNER

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JACKSON and Cooper glared at each other across the conference table, then united in staring contemptuously down the table's length at each man present. There was the expected ripple of apprehension and much fingering of pencils, notepads and ties.

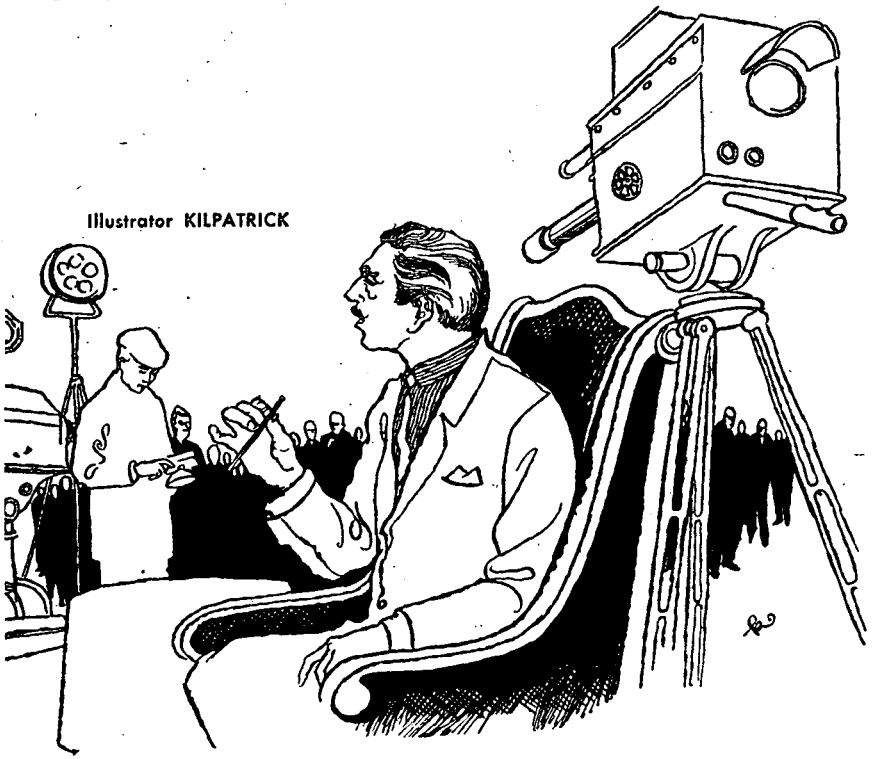
"I'm still waiting," Jackson said, his sunken cheeks collapsing more closely toward each other. "I've been waiting an hour to get one idea out of you people. Well?"

The two dozen men turned perky smiles toward their bosses as if ready to say something of urgent value as soon as the others had finished.

Cooper, bulge-eyed, panned the group in a blurring sweep. "The goose that laid the golden egg is dying. All 3-D gives us now is a fool's gold pebble."

Wright, a vice-president who knew when Cooper was pleased with a phrase, said: "Fool's gold pebbles on an asteroid—great for a space epic." His smile fell into a St. Bernard's droop. "When epic's come back."

"*When* is right."



Illustrator KILPATRICK

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"Stinks," Jackson grunted.

Dead silence fell over the meeting once more as each man contemplated the truth of Cooper's warning. For decades the viewing audience had been dropping and now it was slipping further. The sending networks had discovered that hard-core eye addicts would watch anything in 2- and 3-D, even the oldest re-runs which paid no royalties.

"All right," Jackson said finally. "I'm going to throw something at you." He pointed at the poised pencils and shouted, "Don't take more notes! That's just hiding your—your," he floundered for a phrase, "your spiritual bankruptcy. *Think.* Here goes. The key word in entertainment history is hypo, hypo all the way. Look at cartoon movies. Guys like Disney horsed around half a reel before they got to brass tacks, which was the cat chasing the mouse and getting banged flat, twisted, stretched, chopped up and every other thing the average guy would like to do if he had the nerve. Then along comes an unknown genius and he says, cut out the pretty junk, let's have one beating after another right from the first second." Jackson pounded the table. "He hypoed the thing into a capsule, that's what I said, a capsule!"

"Good thinking," said Cooper. "My turn now. Guys used to stare at pictures of beautiful women but their tastes kept improving. When there were no women beautiful enough the photographers used human-looking dolls. So what happened when the crazy public wanted something even better? They discovered the final secret, just photo the significant parts—that's what hypo means!"

"I'll give these boobs another example," said Jackson. "Take that musical fad twelve years ago. It only came on because Mr. Cooper and me, we figured the public didn't need a slow-moving story, just show production numbers. We cut up every old musical film from Busby Berkeley on and it was our most economical run of good luck. Digest it for 'em, H-Y-P-O it!" He paused ominously. "Well?"

SILENCE, pindropping silence. Then, suddenly, everyone turned a startled stare on a young assistant of about forty who had risen. He cleared his throat and talked rapidly as if afraid slowing down would bring him to his senses and a dead halt. "What does the public want most? Drama that won't bore its jaded palate. Well, what's drama's core? The death scene! Why not show only death scenes from old films, one right after the other? *Highlights of Life,* we could call it. Hypo *Death!*"

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"Stinks," Cooper said wryly.

"What's your name?" Jackson asked. "I never saw you here before."

There was a mass intake of breath, waiting for the minimum severance pay axe to drop.

"Donald Dawes," he said nervously. "I've been attending conferences for the past six months."

There was another mass intake at his lack of diplomacy.

"I'll tell you why it's lousy, son," said Cooper. "The public's seen too many death scenes. People figure just outside the frame some technician was reading a comic book—no realism."

"Oh." Dawes sat down.

"You're fired!" Jackson said. Dawes got up again. "No, not you, the rest of them. Fired with one year's severance."

Cooper glared at him but, sticking to the international executive code of no public recriminations, remained silent.

"But, Mr. Jackson," they all began wailing, finding their voices at last.

"Once more—I say you're fired with a year's severance. Now it's legally binding."

They streamed out of the room and there were some whoops as soon as the last man shut the door behind him. "Morons," Jackson muttered. "You see how some of them smiled?"

"Why not?" Cooper said drily. "A year's severance—not bad!"

"We're avoiding litigation—it's cheap at the price. Anyway the sky's going to be our limit again." He pointed at the lone figure at the other end of the table. "Dawes, you're now a vice-president, the only vice-president left, with double your present salary. Provided that Mr. Cooper also has no objection to our taking on Death as our silent partner."

Cooper's pupils were shrunk to beads frantically darting about to spot the idea behind all Jackson's sudden scene shifting. All he could mumble was, "Hypo. Hypo it! Yes, hypo it." Suddenly the pupils popped to full dilation. "Hypo Death! What an idea I've got! Dawes, you accept the promotion?"

The youthful face flushed with pleasure. "It's such a great honor, Mr. Cooper, Mr. Jackson. Only—I don't know what I've done."

"You got us thinking—that's what," said Jackson. "We get exclusive rights to *real* death bed scenes. All kinds of people will want to do it for—."

"—money, publicity, moral uplift, exhibitionism," Cooper went on. Just like the good old days again when each knew instinctively what the other was thinking. "*Triumph Over Death*—there's the title!"

Jackson flicked on the sound

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writer. "Market test title *Triumph Over Death*. Sampling: 10,000 in semi-depth." He rubbed his hands together. "We buy selected Critical Condition Lists from the medical associations."

"Metropolitan St. Petersburg's still tops. We used it on the rejuvenation products promotion."

"Right—Cleveland too. Have the best prospects depth-investigated, don't tell our detectives what's really up, not yet, evaluate yourself what line of attack to take in each case."

"After the right sell we move in, make a capsule history of the guy, soft soap family members into the documentary picture. Now, whenever the signed-up subject is in really critical shape we have eye-taper cameras set up —very discreetly placed, we want people to act as natural as possible—and eventually we catch the death scene."

"Sure, there'll be lemons—some nut dropping dead in the street or somewhere else unexpected but the law of averages will give us a good library." Jackson stopped. "Look, Dawes, earn your keep. Knock it, knock it hard."

"Well—," Dawes hesitated, "people will say it's morbid, vulgar. They'll say the real thing's too horrible to stomach."

"Who cares what they'll say?" Cooper grinned. "They'll WATCH! Ever see an accident, everybody standing around getting nothing done but mumbling sympathetically how horrible it is but you don't see them going away unless they're afraid of being called as witnesses. Knock harder!"

"Well, what's special about death? Everybody sees it sooner of later around them."

"The life span's too long nowadays," said Jackson. "And then it's so professionalized you don't see much anyway. Why, there are millions of people over seventy who have never seen a stiff in their lives!"

"What's more," Cooper went on. "It's the one bit on *everybody's* schedule. You can estimate a hundred percent audience except for tiny tots, plus doctors, nurses and undertakers who see it every week."

"How could anybody get tired of real death scenes?" Jackson demanded. He blew three rings around his cigar. "It's a bottomless subject. People will fight to get on. They'll have a kind of immortality because the rushes will be revived again and again. Cooper, just think of those residuals!"

"I most certainly have."

Dawes threw up his hands. "How can I knock something that's foolproof? Mr. Cooper, Mr. Jackson—it's the final formula, the ultimate Hypo!" Dawes rubbed his brow. "But—."

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"Yes?" They said in unison.

"Well, isn't it going to take a long time to get it going?"

The slight tension vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "Son," Jackson laughed, "we'll have a minimum of eight programs on the feeder backlog inside of six weeks!"

"And we'll have a complete pilot film, death scene and all, under three weeks or you can say I don't know a damned thing about human nature."

"Mr. Cooper," Dawes said, genuinely moved, "I would never say a thing like that."

COOPER took over what he called the smelliest job, weeding down the medical lists for likely prospects. "Never saw so many clinkers in my life," he said, "I don't think half of them are ready to drop dead!" But the other half did make an interesting list.

Meanwhile Jackson consulted Brautz, the noted psychosocioanalyst. "Strictly confidential," he said. "Only a handful are in the picture so far."

"Haven't I always maintained Top Commercial Secrecy?" Brautz asked, professionally ruffled.

"Just standard routine, Doctor. Here goes—we're going to have a series on Death, the real thing, no dummies or actors playing the parts. Give us a report tomorrow." He watched Brautz for reactions as he spelled out the details but Brautz's face stayed properly blank; an expert worthy of respect didn't give his reactions away in non-billable form.

The compact report was on Jackson's desk, though, when he arrived the next morning. The first sheet was headed:

Psychoanalytic Conclusions On Proposed Death Series

I. The One-At-A-Time Law

(a) Mass death scenes from actuality have never done well with home viewers. Nazi concentration camp newsreels, documentaries on atomic wars have always been flicked off. Reasons: too vast to grasp; need to forget horror on such a scale; refusal to recognise one's own sadistic tendencies by declaring atrocities 'clever fakes.'

(b) Human beings can only understand One Thing At A Time. Example: during last great wave of germ warfare trials, limelight stolen by one woman killed trying to save her canary from electrocution in home permanent waving device.

(c) Proposed series overcomes (b). Shows One Death At A Time.

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II. Ultimate Hypo Reversing Hypo Trend

(a) Sex, beat-'em-up and romance programs have to be hypoed more and more. This leads to dead end where addict no longer reacts.

(b) No need for dead end hypo with Death—ever. Not as long as audience has faith they're going to see real thing at end of hour.

III. Can Series Sell Products and Services?

(a) Useless for joy items. Guilt by association.

(b) Perfect for organisation merchandising anxiety items—save your health, cure your shortcomings, help the next guy, and so forth. *Note*: Very big for selling prestige of automated doctors as well as competing human ones.

IV. Handling Temporary Opposition of Professional Groups

At that point Jackson called for Cooper. "See anything here?" he asked.

Cooper retracted the bulge for near sight and swept down the center of the two sheets. "Yeah, the automated doctors," he said. "When our subjects take their home health readings it can activate the taper cameras for closer shots. And once it signals *Critical Now* the 3-D lenses will stay on permanently. The medical instrument makers will sponsor and human doctor associations will have to protect themselves with equal time."

"What's your first prospect?"

"A guy in St. Petersburg, where else? Only eighty-five too. He's got an incurable form of nerve cancer and—.".

"You're sure it's incurable?" Jackson said anxiously. "I mean most of this stuff's child's play now, a few treatments and the guy could be cured."

"No, he can't last more than ten days."

"Any chance for a cure developing within ten days? The therapeutic computers—."

"Not a chance," Cooper grinned. "This is so peculiar they have *people* looking for a cure."

Jackson breathed easier. "I don't look for blood but you do have to protect your investment." He felt mellow and suddenly content with life. "Call the kid in. We'll take him along to learn the ropes. How do you size him up?"

Cooper grinned back. "We used to be that green."

"But not for long fortunately." He rang for Dawes and had hardly taken his finger off the tab before the honorary vice-president entered.

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"Something wrong?" Dawes asked anxiously.

They both cackled. "Getting anxious?" Cooper said. "Good executive sign."

"Thank you, Mr. Cooper." His light blue eyes said it too.

"You're coming on our first field trip." Jackson pressed his index fingers against the two vast dimples that were his cheeks and a hint of plastic molars seemed to show through the thin skin. "Subject has an incurable form of nerve cancer, only eighty-five."

"A shame," Dawes said absently. "Say, suppose a cure comes along?"

"It won't," said Cooper. "All been thoroughly researched. This Haley case should be an easy beginning for you, Dawes, because we're not using any tricks."

"Why not?" asked Dawes.

"Yeah, I'd like to know that too."

"Well," Cooper said, "*you* should have figured it, Jackson. This man's well-balanced, ready to face death, and has almost found peace—fortunately there's that *almost*. The Investigation Agency went through his psychoanalytic tapes, just two years old, and gave me a complete rundown."

"You heard the psychoanalytic tapes?" Dawes said, incredulous. "I thought they're completely private."

"Of course, they're private," Cooper said, "but we have special ways of getting to that sort of thing. After all, we do have a higher duty to the public."

"If it helped the company," Jackson said, "I'd let Cooper see my tapes any time."

"The same goes for me," said Cooper.

"Sure," Dawes said hastily. "I see your point. It's just that I didn't know so I was surprised."

"Oh, there'll be lots of surprises," Jackson chuckled.

THEY were in St. Petersburg at 12:30 that afternoon. William Haley's residence was a pleasant stucco cottage set in a small garden and was far out from the great metropolitan center.

"Another reason why he's such a good prospect," Cooper said as they passed on the other side of the road. "Fewer residences out here. More chance for privacy. Until we have this copyrighting pilot film in the can secrecy will be worth its weight in gold."

Suddenly a tall man rose from a row of chrysanthemum bushes close to the road wall. He was busy inspecting a flower and did not notice the trio studying him. "Our first prospect," Jackson said. "It's almost like pasting the first customer's dollar on the wall of a new business. Fine looking fellow."

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He was. Haley was perfectly erect and not an ounce of excess flesh showed anywhere on his frame. His face was serene as he considered the petals.

"Those flowers will still be blooming when he's dead," said Dawes. "Sad."

"The flowers still blooming," Cooper repeated. "Good, we'll use that as a motif."

The three men crossed over and stood on the grass border of the road, waiting. Finally, Cooper coughed and, as a few tiny petals floated to the ground, the older man looked up. "Beautiful roses," Cooper said. "Are they real?"

"They're not real roses."

"Oh?"

"They're real chrysanthemums." Jackson chuckled but Haley considered the error matter-of-factly. "Don't go in for planting artificials. Pretty to look at but I like things to be real. Who wants something always to stay the same? Would you like to stay as you are indefinitely, young man?"

"No," Cooper lied. "But I'm not as young as you think. Seventy-eight."

"There are differences more important than calendar years." His eyes narrowed to a horizon that seemed beyond that of the nearby golf course.

"ou're eighty-five," Cooper d. He held his palm out in gentle admonition. "Oh, don't be surprised, Mr. Haley, we know a great deal about you—the *most important thing* in fact. Ten days."

"Are you a therapy team? I told the hospital no more treatments, human or mechanical. They can't give me what I still need."

"*I* can, Mr. Haley—*we* can, I should say. This is Fred Jackson. I'm Everett Cooper."

"Glad to meet you gentlemen." Haley merely nodded but gave in as three hands waved frantically over the low wall. "Heard your names somewhere before—no, my memory's bad these days. Well, Everett Cooper, what's your proposition?"

"Brass tacks, I like that. You're not worried about passing on—."

"You mean dying."

"—but you feel there's still unfinished business, right?"

"Right, but—."

"The business consists of two items. *A*—You have two children by your third marriage and you'd like to leave a decent inheritance. You haven't told them what's ahead for you. *B*—You feel your earlier life—five wives, highjinks all the way—was wasteful. You've come to a deeper view of things and want to set a better example. Well then, you can satisfy both these needs." He waved a check in the air.

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"Here's fifty thousand full-strength dollars, not the inflated variety, to go in trust for those kids the moment you sign with us."

"Say, I know you two." He looked mildly displeased. "You're Cooper-Jackson—."

"Jackson-Cooper," Jackson laughed. "Mustn't upset all our stationery. We did it on the toss of a coin."

"Used to be big, weren't you? Don't watch 2-D and 3-D any more. Nothing of value—." His eyes widened and he suddenly stared straight into Cooper's frozen grin. "Fifty thousand dollars! Why?"

"There's no catch—we *still* are the biggest producers, Mr. Haley. Now then, this is your role."

ALL philosophical detachment disappeared from the man's face as Jackson explained the details and by the time it was over he was misty-eyed. "Mr. Jackson."

"Call me Fred—please."

"Well, Fred, it's a beautiful idea. Could have been cheap and vulgar but it's above that. Sure, I want those things. I've plenty of home movie albums you can use—."

"The biggest well-known pain about amateurs," Cooper muttered to Dawes. "Advice!"

"—but no whitewash job. I want people to see some of the shortcomings that made it impossible for me to be curable now—to learn from it and from the way I've attained peace in the past few years."

Dawes, unable to restrain himself, broke in. "Mr. Haley, our most sacred rule is that the subject must give his approval to the background material before the big scene!"

Haley extended his hand to them again and said, "'Tell me not a man's life has been a happy one until I know the nature of his death.'"

"What show's that from?" Jackson asked.

"No show. Herodotus."

"Bill, would that be in the public domain?" Haley nodded. "Good. We'll use it—on your program if you don't object."

"Not at all. Gentlemen, I suppose we don't have completely the same motives but, still, I thank you. Now I must take my nap."

That same afternoon two camera technicians came down from New York and set the eye-tapers at various strategic locations in the cottage's walls. They also went over Haley's file of home films, the usual assortment, and everybody was very pleased with the material. By evening they had spliced three-quarters of an hour of life background and the legal details were settled in a series of iron-clad agreements.

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They got back to New York about three the next morning and sat around the office, too exultant to go directly to sleep. Jackson stared at Cooper through an empty shot glass and seemed to find him more human that way. "Got to give you credit, Cooper, you really did pick the set-up. I think this one's going to be a noble death."

"Thanks. We're going to get all kinds—snivelling, yelling, happy, twisted, crazy—and noble. You name it, somebody'll supply it."

"Any other really good leads?" Jackson demanded.

"A Gus Crakely in suburban Cleveland. Circulatory collapse—the medics have already overrun the workable limit for prosthetic plastic substitutes and now he has two weeks at most to go."

"Have to work fast. What about Cleveland tomorrow afternoon?" Worry caved his face in further than usual. "Got to get a feminine slant going too."

"Right."

"That's a small problem," said Dawes. "I've been going over a lot of studies and Brautz has confirmed my findings. Turns out women are more sympathetically interested in the deaths of men too. For every female death bed scene dramatized there are three and four-fifths male scenes."

"Good work." Jackson looked blearily at him but with a little more respect. "Now, Dawes, you'll come along with us tomorrow again, I mean this afternoon. After that you must manage your own field trips. We're going to be loaded with front office work here."

THEY awoke late that morning in a room heavy with the smell of dead tobacco smoke and whiskey. Dawes was pinkly brisk inside of five minutes but the two older men could not keep awake as they smacked bilious tongues and lips together and, after considering Dawes with disgust, swallowed SpeedUp pills.

"You have to be careful," Dawes said. "They're supposed to shorten your life. Most people can't get them."

"We certainly aren't most people," Jackson said grumpily.

But soon his eyes were bright again and he and Cooper were ready to grab the ball and start running. They reached Cleveland at four in the afternoon and, once more, had to head for the outskirts of town. The cabdriver left them at the Crakely gate and said, "Sorry, you'll have to go up the drive yourselves."

"What the hell's the matter?" Jackson demanded. "You'd think the house was haunted."

"Brother, it is—until old man Crakely dies. He's one hundred and thirty-eight but he'll live forever."

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Jackson looked distressed as the cab pulled away. Cooper laughed. "Don't worry, he's dying this time."

Dawes' eyes swept over the broad lawn to the great imitation of a Tudor pile beyond. "I'd sure like to have a place like this some day."

"The futility of ambition," Jackson sighed. "Mine is bigger, so is Cooper's, but we hardly ever get to see them."

A very suspicious aging man with a razor-sharp nose came to the door. He stayed behind it with only the nose and one green eye showing around its edge. "We're not buying anything," he said. "We have everything."

"Even enough money?" asked Cooper, handing in his gold leaf calling card.

Another eye and a mouth became visible. "You owe my father any money?"

"We want to *give* him some."

The door slammed shut with oaken finality. "Jackass!" muttered Jackson and began pressing the buzzer while Cooper banged the knocker. Dawes after a moment's hesitation joined in. Finally the door opened a sliver's width to let out the howling of blood-eager dogs in a distant room.

"Hear that?" warned the man inside. "You'd better get away before I sic the lot of 'em on you."

"What's going on down there?" someone shouted. "Some more of your damned women, Geoffrey. I'll sic the dogs on them."

"No, dad, just some new racket. They claim to be from some Damned Cooper Company and say they want to give us money."

"What? What? Open that door." There was a muffled thumping as someone fell down a few stairs, then a tangle of sibilant hissing. "You idiot, you stupid idiot, that's Jackson-Cooper Productions and there's gold leaf in that card!"

Cooper gently pushed the door and it swung open to reveal the sharp-nosed son, standing at the foot of a broad staircase with a bent old man in a dressing gown waving a bent yellow finger in his face. "Good day, Mr. Crakely," he said.

A lacework of fine lines spread across Crakely's face as he prepared a smile. "Won't you come in?"

"We're here to offer you money in connection with an interesting proposition."

The lines broke horrifyingly into still finer wrinkles and Crakely limped toward them, rubbing his left thigh. "Slipped —wanted to greet you people personally. A great honor." He gave Dawes a vague shake of the head. "Mr. Cooper, Mr. Jackson, have a seat, please."

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"Let's get upstairs first, father."

"What amount were you thinking of?"

"Fifty-thousand full-strength dollars."

"I don't like that. When I get money I want it right away. Full-strength dollar guarantees are only an inflation hedge on *later* payments."

"I think we'd better discuss this matter in your bedroom where you'll be comfortable," Cooper said.

"I like it here."

"Come along, Mr. Crakely," a brisk young nurse called down. She glided swiftly on her soft-soled shoes down the stairs and took him by the arm. "Better in your own room where everything is so comfy for you."

"Hmmmmm! Hmmmmm!" the old man mumbled, sucking damply at his gums, as the nurse took him into the lift. As it started up, he shouted down at them. "Don't discuss anything with that one! I handle all negotiations."

They hurried up the stairs, keeping level with him, and Jackson said, "Only proper, only fitting."

THEY reached the second floor and crept behind Crakely, now tired from his sudden exertions, to the bedroom. It was an enormous chamber filled with dark, heavy Renaissance furniture and Crakely slipped jerkily into bed, the upright pillows forming a dead-white nimbus about him. "Good color shot," Jackson whispered to Dawes.

"What? What?" he wheezed. "Now then what's the deal?"

"You're a great figure in the world of affairs," Cooper began.

"You didn't come here to tell me *that!* I know my assessed valuation."

"I'm sure you do," Cooper said admiringly. "We want to feature your life on a sixty-minute program." He went into the details while the old man contemplated the puckered joint of his left index finger through narrowing eye-slits. Crakely junior was smiling, a more juice-laden replica of his father.

Finally the old man asked cautiously. "Where are the papers?"

Dawes handed over an attache case and Cooper deftly flipped the documents from a compartment. "They're all there," he said, handing them to Crakely.

The eyes, still slitted, raced down the sheets. "Can't fool me with any fine print, Cooper, I'm up to all your tricks. You'll have to give me more than fifty thousand, I can tell you that."

"That's the standard rate," Dawes protested.

Jackson nudged him to keep quiet. Crakely caught both the remark and the nudge. He con-

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sidered Dawes contemptuously. "Don't like to see innocent-faced shills used to front a shakedown." His fingers clawed with a separate vitality of their own at the bedsheets. "Make another bid. I'm not a 'standard' subject for your show."

"Fifty-five thousand," Jackson nodded while Dawes gasped his protest.

"Are you kidding? You're talking about my death. Sixty thousand. Not a penny less."

"Fifty-six thousand," Jackson replied.

The haggling continued until the figure was settled at fifty-eight thousand. After Cooper wrote in the new cash proviso the old man insisted that everyone present sign it. As soon as he had the completed documents in his trembling hand he began cackling uncontrollably. "You fools!" he said. "I'd have settled for fifty if you'd stuck to it. You double fools! I haven't guaranteed to die—I'll see all of you in your graves."

His voice kept rising and, just as the nurse hurried in, he fell out of bed. Cooper's calm expression began to fade as Crakely got back without assistance. "See, I can manage."

They were all shooed out of the room while Crakely was locking the papers in his strongbox and warning the nurse not to pry. "We'll have to wait downstairs," Jackson explained to his son, "until the technicians arrive."

"Don't worry about that live-forever ranting," Geoffrey shrugged. "All the doctors agree. He has an automated doctor, too, of course—it's good enough even if he picked it up second hand—and we take readings twice a day. Everything, blood pressure, cell collapse rate and the rest of that stuff, they extrapolate the same date, odds of a million to one."

"Have to call New York now," Jackson said, leaving them. The younger Crakely followed to keep an eye on him.

"Got to hand it to you," Cooper said to Dawes. "You'd have saved us some money, not that a few thousand's going to be anything from now on."

"So unfair," said Dawes. "That Mr. Haley, a fine man, getting less than this rich one!"

"Justice is beside the point. The public's entitled to results," Cooper said soberly. Jackson came running back into the room. "They getting right out here?"

"In an hour but that's nothing. Haley's dead! Died a few hours ago, ahead of schedule."

"Everything all right?" Cooper asked anxiously.

"Seems to be."

"Then," Cooper grinned, eyes like unclouded full moons, "we are in business."

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WHEN they reached New York they learned that Haley's relatives wanted to respect the dying man's wishes and were pleased with both the idea of a living memorial and that of the money to be disbursed. But the reels of Haley's last hours were the greatest news of all. They showed him proceeding calmly about the minor chores of a well-automated bachelor household, studying family albums and the Bible, and generally behaving with a dignity that drew tears to Dawes' eyes.

"My parents died on a moon run," Dawes said. "Dad was going for a heart-rest and mom insisted on going along. The ship cracked up a thousand miles out from the resorts and all I have is the usual handful of home movies. If I only had this kind of keepsake."

"Did you see all those right profiles he gave us without being directed! A great guy." Cooper caught himself up short. "Like your folks were, I'm sure, Dawes."

But Jackson was looking coldly at the younger man. "We're going to have to let twenty more technicians in on some of this tonight," he said sharply. "We'll have the copyrighting showing tomorrow. Dawes, go get some sleep. You're going out tomorrow—on your own."

"I'll do my best," he said eagerly. "I'll come down in the morning for final word."

"Yes, you do that."

After he was gone Cooper demanded, "What's this about? He could have sat in tonight a while and learned something."

"He may know too much already." He handed over an envelope and sheet covered with block lettering. "I found this on the desk just now."

The message said:

Everything's under wraps at Jackson-Cooper, isn't it? You think we're such fools we can't see a raw deal coming on? You kept Dawes for a reason he's too green to see. If you don't give him a percentage of your stock as is standard for vice-presidents at other outfits, I'll spill the beans about your last full staff meeting, the way you stole some big idea from him. I've a recording of that session and will release it plus other information tomorrow morning if there is no immediate stock gift. There'll be a hundred imitators' claims the same day yours is released. Then what will happen to your exclusive rights?

An ex-employee.

"Nobody could get in with recording equipment, Jackson. It's a bluff."

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"Yes, but can we be sure? This is too big to take the smallest chance until the copyright's clinched. And how do we know our baby-faced Dawes isn't the instigator?"

Cooper began pacing the floor. Suddenly he froze and looked directly at Jackson. "How do I know you're not behind this? If we both give Dawes a slice, the two of you could outvote me."

"Very interesting you should have such ideas, Cooper, because I've been wondering the same thing about you."

"You just wait a minute—."

Jackson picked the anonymous message up and studied it again. "Of course, there's another angle. He could be on his own. Figures to make an entering wedge, then play us against each other."

Cooper shrugged. "We could always squelch that if we gave him just two and a half percent each. But there's still another angle. Whoever wrote this doesn't show any knowledge of specific details. Doesn't sound like Dawes."

"Maybe. But Dawes could be showing a finer hand than we give him credit for." He strummed the desk. "Okay, Cooper. We'll announce the stock award tonight. It'll keep the others quiet too, until copyright's over—sugar them up with hope. Not that there's much chance of a leak now—as soon as they see this stuff they're going to realize we've got the inside track on something that can pay them more than any stool-pigeon gamble."

AS Jackson predicted, the technical staff was wildly enthusiastic when it received the news later in the evening. The crews got down to work so efficiently that the two partners had a chance to take turns at catnapping while the final touches were being put on the product.

Dawes arrived bright and early for instructions and seemed completely overwhelmed by his new good fortune. "It's such an honor just to be working closely with you two and then this! It's just too much. I hope I can live up to it."

"The man you're to contact," said Cooper, blank-faced, "is a scientist in Mexico City. We'll be sending a crew this afternoon. Meanwhile, study all the documents carefully."

After Dawes was gone they exchanged nervous glances. "Can't make him out," Cooper said. "Is he really as naive as he looks?"

"What's the difference? Once this thing is taped down we'll be able to take care of him."

The minutes dragged as they kept the news machines open for any announcement of a counterclaim by some other company.

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Then at noon word came through that the Library of Congress, after a computer search for parallel claims, had conceded theirs. The principal agony was over; now their only problem was the audition.

A large crowd of institution leaders was gathered in the viewing hall when they came in and most of them were grumbling. "Haven't seen a decent item from this outfit in ten years," muttered Shouse of International AntiVirus Control. "Just what have they done for us lately?"

"They can *un*sell a product!" nodded Curby of Ultimate Vitamins. "Can you imagine anybody *un*selling in this day and age?"

"I can. Happens all the time now," said another tycoon with an especially portentous face.

The room abruptly darkened and the standard announcement flashed on screen:

Exclusive rights to the following ideas presentation was established at the Library of Congress this morning.

"Get on with the bad news!" someone shouted.

In the center of the screen a tiny line of elite type exploded into *Triumph Over Death!* The film cut suddenly to a full length shot of a figure of almost Roman dignity stretched out in neat houseclothes on a bed. "This

man," said a chocolaty-rich voice, "died one minute ago. His name is William Haley and the time is 6:07 P.M. April the 3rd, 2018. The automated doctor has not yet summoned the mortuary crew but *you* are already here! For the next hour you will experience the reality of this man's life—and death."

"My father was a good man who learned all his life from his human frailties and rose above them." As the new voice went on the camera moved in until the peaceful face, its angular features set in firm yet relaxed lines, filled the 3-D projection.

The audience burst into wild applause. "The greatest ever!" "What an approach!" "The art beyond art!" From then on the uproar was almost continuous and when the final shots came on of Haley settling into his death bed pandemonium broke loose in the hall. He slowly wrapped the extension from the automated

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doctor around his wrist and the readings, lightly superimposed over his image, showed steady decline until the unbearable second when machine and body were one in the stillness of clinical death.

"I have first rights to time!" Shouse was hollering as the lights came on.

"I was here ahead of you!" Curby broke in.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Jackson said. "There's going to be enough for everybody and this is one item where the reruns can even outstrip first runs."

His statement reassured them and they settled down to the business of dividing available situations. By five that afternoon Jackson and Cooper knew they were the biggest thing in the history of entertainment. When they finally found themselves alone they counted the time purchases over and over again, pinching the contracts to see if they were real. Jackson looked dreamily into his private horizon and said, "We didn't have to give that kid five percent. What a waste for a few hours of protection!"

"True," Cooper agreed. "But he can be useful for a while."

Now suspicion was back. "What are you trying to say, Cooper?"

"Don't start that again—if there's any dirty work around here it would have to be you."

They fell to shouting at one another until a contract, sent skidding by a flailing arm, sloshed into a puddle of scotch on the desk. Cooper pulled the document away just in time and carefully, lovingly, dried it off. "Eight million," he said, blowing a kiss at the contract. "Let's be calm, Jackson."

Jackson stood up and solemnly shook his hand. "You're right. Let the Dawes matter ride. We've got it made and nothing's upsetting this applecart."

DAWES reported in the next afternoon. "Dr. Huber's all set," he said. "Had some trouble with him, though. Talk about objectivity! He's the greatest man I've seen for it—outside of you two," he added hastily. "He says the general public's decadent, wants others to do all the thinking, and needs stronger medicine to get them back to science. He not only wants his death bed scene but a filmed clinical study of his dissection—."

"You can't do that!" Jackson shouted. "It's too complicated for the public."

"And vulgar!" Cooper chimed in. "You had no right to commit us. We two still run this company and don't you forget it."

Dawes fell back before the blast. "Of course you do, Mr. Cooper, and you, Mr. Jackson.

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He eventually fell in line. We'll have a straight formula run on Dr. Huber."

"That's better!" they mumbled.

Dawes merely looked puzzled and waited for further instructions while he dreamed about the vast house he had seen on a little side excursion coming back from Mexico City. It was set in an exclusively zoned dune area of Lake Erie. The salesman had explained how important it was for a rising young executive to have such a house even if he never got to live much in it. He could actually afford it now. After only five years in entertainment production Dawes knew he had reached a point most men never attained even at the end of their lives. What could a Haley, fine as he had been in his way, know of that much triumph?

"Don't stand there daydreaming!" snapped Jackson. "Get some sleep, Dawes. We expect you to have plenty of ideas."

THE next week was one endless series of crises. Word of mouth in the trade was now too great and they decided to give *Triumph Over Death* an immediate buildup that would be under their tight control rather than that of the rumor mongers. This brought a committee of protesting religious leaders and the pitch had to be carefully handled.

"We're giving you guys a great break," Cooper objected. "This isn't some girly show, this is a program to make the world's viewers aware of the one mystery that's at the heart of all your religions so I don't know why all the squawks."

Jackson was about to speak but Dawes, not seeming to notice, broke in ahead of him. "It's all being done in the best taste. And whenever a religious representative is present at the deathbed he reviews all the material in which he features and can cut shots of himself which he deems improper."

"Very fair," said one of the men of the cloth. "But we'll have to see some of the programs before we can be sure."

"Look," said Jackson. "Most people don't even bother with deathbed religion any more. We're offering you *more* than we have to; we want you on our side where you belong. Just watch that revival after the first programs!"

There was considerable hemming and hawing at first but eventually the committee left in a happier frame of mind than had been evident on its arrival.

"We have them where we want them," Jackson said, gleefully plunging his hands in his pockets. "Only, Cooper, don't try to sic your boy on me. I didn't like the way he interrupted me."

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"What about his interrupting *me?* I suppose that just happened to happen!"

Dawes looked at them with the puzzled expression what was almost permanent now. "I didn't know I was interrupting anybody," he said.

They gave him a look that was very frightening and, he was surprised to discover, just a little bit annoying.

THEN there was the crisis about the Crakelys. First the son, then the father, threatened to sabotage the death scene unless more money was forthcoming. The matter was finally straightened out after the lawyers warned the fifty-eight thousand would be attached if anything illegal were attempted.

But the worst of it was that April 17th came and went without Crakely fulfilling the company's great expectations. "Damn him," Cooper spluttered. "Just what he threatened—the million to one shot. Those bone-thin ones can last forever."

Jackson looked down at his own skeletal frame and smiled. "Very true," he said, "much to your undoubted regret. But don't worry—*he* can't last."

The next day Crakely did die and the shots were worth the scare of the extra wait. They showed a roomful of people spastically scurrying about to the old man's cranky commands and there were some beautiful shots that could be brought into close-up of the barely fleshed fingers grasping at sheet and air to bring the world into their private circle of death.

AT the end of the week, after another fruitful field trip, Dawes took a rest by visiting the All Sell Club which was located on the top floor of the tallest building in the city. He was feeling wonderfully exhausted. The purchase of the Lake Erie property had been completed that afternoon and everyone looked at him with respect close to awe as he entered. "Third man on the Jackson Cooper totem," a producer whispered to an account executive. "They've got the ultimate formula. We'll all be working for them soon—and glad to get crumbs from those two rats! That kid doesn't look their style."

Great men were always the victims of envy, Dawes realized, but it was odd how many times that word *rat* kept coming up among top executives in connection with Mr. Jackson and Mr. Cooper. He was going to walk out when he saw a familiar figure approaching. It was Mr. Wright who used to manage the division where he had been a mere copy assistant.

Wright saw him and headed his way, grinning broadly. He staggered once and said, "Great

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going, kid. Let's find a corner."

"Fine, Mr. Wright. You sure you want any more drinks?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

Alphonse, the head waiter, shooed some account men away from the best window and ceremoniously led them to it. As they sat down, the entire city beneath their feet, Wright muttered, "I fixed those rats!"

"What do you mean?" Dawes asked uneasily. "Do you have another job, Mr. Wright? Maybe I could get you back in."

"Uh, uh, not while they're in the saddle. Anyway, I did fix them good and you did get those shares. Figured they were picking your brains."

"*You* arranged my promotion?"

"Sort of." He described the note he had sent.

Dawes was shocked. "But they developed most of *Triumph Over Death* themselves."

"Wake up, kid. This is the twenty-first century. You got them started on it and I've seen them steal plenty from underlings and ditch them like that!" He wet his fingertips in the martini and snapped them together. "Now then, I've got a job at half the pay and I'm twice as happy."

Dawes started to get up. "I think I ought to go, Mr. Wright, and explain this to Mr. Jackson and Mr. Cooper."

Wright roared with laughter and the grey hairs of his eyebrows bristled. "They'd can you immediately, think it was some plot of yours and wouldn't believe a word. Very suspicious gentlemen." He leaned forward. "You'd lose that new place on Erie I read about— everything. What for?"

Dawes slowly sank back into his seat. He could see the magnificent house with that glittering thirty yard sweep of glass as if he were standing on the shore right now. "They do get nasty at times," he admitted.

"I knew you'd see it the right way," the other man laughed.

"Some day," said Dawes, narrowing his eyes and disregarding the laughter, "some day you'll have your old job back. You deserve the best, Mr. Wright."

TWO weeks later a backlog of eight deaths had been accumulated and the show was ready to roll. The Haley Story went over even more sensationally than anticipated and within a few days the firm was flooded with offers of death scenes at no charge. In some cases, there were even bids to pay for the privilege but Jackson sternly warned the staff, after setting an example with ten random firings, that nothing like that would be permitted. "We have a high trust," he told the great mass of new employees gathered in the company

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auditorium, "and we'll meet our social obligations. The only criterion for *Triumph Over Death* selections is public interest, or rather, *the* public interest."

Afterwards the partners took Dawes into a private conference room and announced there were going to be further changes. "Great news for you," Jackson said. "We're reorganizing all down the line, taking you out of *Triumph* and giving you a new opportunity—a detective story series."

"But there hasn't been a successful detective series in twenty years!"

Grinning, each man took one shoulder for a fatherly pat. "That's why it's a great break," said Jackson.

Dawes took a deep breath and started his counterattack. "You always valued my ideas before."

"Right," Jackson laughed, "but the *Triumph* formula is permanently fixed, can't be improved on, so your services there—."

"What a shame," Dawes broke in, "because I had some ideas for making the shows longer without losing hypo."

Both men froze in mid-laugh. "What do you mean?" demanded Cooper. "It's perfect already."

Dawes' grin went as far back as his molars. "Oh, I shouldn't bother you."

"Look here," Cooper said, "you're an employee like the rest of us and you still have five percent."

"Oh? I thought that would somehow be voted out of my hands too."

"Watch your step," Cooper persisted, "any idea you have you owe to the company."

Jackson beamed at Dawes. "Now, now, Mr. Cooper, we mustn't be hasty with this young fellow, must we? Of course, we'd like you to keep your holdings, Don—."

"Well, one idea is this," said Dawes. "You could start with the Dr. Huber stuff. He left a mass of audios detailing his medical history and you rejected all of it as too technical. But look at the understandable lines you could spread through the life record, padding out the program excitingly—'In 1978 I had a severe diabetic attack but the newly-discovered Bewley-Barton method cured me of it. Unfortunately, this technique, not perfected then, brought on an equally severe, mysterious attack of hepatitis in 1979. This was completely eliminated by Cranston's new Electrochemical Fix which led to a dangerous lung condition. When the lung condition responded to treatment a side effect reactivated the diabetes as well as an old case of rheumatic fever, etcetera, etcetera' until the final statement, 'at this point lungs, endocrine system and

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blood circulation all began to collapse simultaneously despite the excellent medical care received.' "

Jackson rubbed his chin. Cooper followed suit. Neither spoke.

"Get the point? Huber's experience is what happens to everybody one way or another. Well, since the days of medicine men there's been nothing the public likes better than a hefty string of disease names. Sciatica, lumbago, tuberculosis, arthritis, rheumatism, nephritis—millions of elderly ladies openly tremble in delighted terror and the men do, too, on the sly. It's the supreme popular poetry!"

"It's a hypo worth considering," Jackson said. "Uh—what about your other ideas?"

"Absolutely not," Dawes shook his head. "I'd only discuss them as the problems arose. Your time's too valuable to waste."

"We might as well keep you on *Triumph* since you're so interested in it," said Cooper.

"Right," agreed his partner, "we didn't realize you wanted to stay there so badly. And now, what are those other ideas? We have plenty of time to listen."

A touch of shrewdness came into Dawes' open face that they had never seen there before. "As I said, gentlemen, they should wait for the proper context. The good of our company must come first."

IT HAD been a close call and from then on, he knew, he would have to be very careful if he wanted to hold on to everything he had gained—the blessings of wide private spaces in a greatly crowded world and of a respect that he felt wherever men of affairs recognized him. A few times he indicated passing approval for an idea of Jackson's against one of Cooper's or vice versa, just enough to keep them from effectively joining forces.

With each passing week the stakes became higher. Producing houses that in some cases went back to the medium's beginning collapsed one by one and were absorbed at bargain rates into Jackson-Cooper. The ratings did not go up any more only because they were already close to mass saturation but time segments did keep increasing. People, it seemed, could watch other people dying all day long.

There were, as always, a few disgruntled intellectuals, pointing with alarm at the fact that a small, if growing, minority of watchers were developing *accidie;* which, it turned out, simply meant despair of living. But the mainstream of experts quickly replied to these Cassandras by showing the viewing majority had found renewed interest in life's pleasures and labors. And even if this *accidie* did spread, it couldn't threaten the ratings

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since these were the very people who watched *every* rerun series.

But one night about the twentieth week of *Triumph* something happened to shake Dawes more seriously. He had been feeling odd for a few days and when he applied the automated doctor it indicated very slight traces of Moleculide poisoning in his system. It also reported that he would have been dead by now if his resistance were not somewhat above average. He had been wondering the past several nights why his three bedtime shots of scotch (a habit only recently acquired) tasted so much better than before and now a quick analysis revealed the scotch as the source of the poison. To top things off he found a 3-D taper hidden in his bedroom wall.

The next day he came to the office with the taper. He greeted the two men as if nothing had happened and they looked at him with poker-tight faces but he made certain they saw him pull the tape and destroy it. "An experiment that failed," he said offhandedly.

Jackson gave him a tiny, refined smile as if he were holding seed pearls between his lips. "I'm glad I had nothing to do with it," he said. "I hate to be connected with failure."

"Well, *I* certainly can say the same," Cooper glared back.

To which Dawes managed to return a smile even smaller than Jackson's.

BUT the same afternoon he contacted Wright and arranged a meeting for that night. He approached Wright's building by an extremely circuitous route; it gave him at least a chance to slip away from the investigators who must be trailing him.

"What's the great mystery?" Wright wanted to know. He peered at him for a moment. "You look kind of different."

"I don't see why," Dawes said stiffly. Then he told him what had happened.

"Now you know what they're like anyway," Wright nodded.

"I've known that for a while. But I'm not interested in a lot of idle moralizing and speculation at this point. I don't think they'll try anything right away but eventually they will. And next time they'll be a lot smarter. Wright, I need someone I can trust. I'd like to make you my aide."

Wright frowned thoughtfully. "You know, for a minute there you almost looked like them." He rubbed his eyes. "Wouldn't they fight my coming in?"

Dawes' jaw tightened. "Maybe, but I know how to hit back now. I'd get my way."

"I'll bet you would. Well, it's a big promotion all right."

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"We're the biggest thing outside the presidency itself. You know there's nothing bigger than entertainment and we're spreading all over the place. Okay then, there are only two people bigger than me right now." His voice softened. "You'd be a good influence up there, raise the moral tone."

Wright considered him a while. "Still so young, too."

"I don't see what that—."

"No, I won't take it, Don," he said firmly.

"But why not? Look, you can't expect me to plead with you."

"No, I wouldn't expect it. This has nothing to do with your being younger than me but I'm afraid taking the position wouldn't make any difference for you now."

"That's the rottenest thing I've ever heard!" Dawes snapped. "Don't bother to show me the door. I made certain I knew where it was when I came in."

FOR a few days Wright's mystifying words rankled him but there was too much important work to be done to mull over the ideas of someone who was obviously failure-prone and neurotically proud of it.

And there was the crucial need to keep an eye on Jackson and Cooper whenever possible.

Then one night Cooper called him frantically on the videophone. "Come right over," he said. "Look, Dawes, don't hesitate like that. If you're afraid bring all the people you want. It would be better for the three of us to thrash this out alone but just make sure you get here right away."

"I'll bring my chauffer up with me," he lied. It wouldn't hurt to confuse any underhanded planning but, judging by what he had seen, Cooper for once really meant what he was saying.

On the way up in the elevator he met Jackson whose shaky hands belied the calm expression on his face. "Know what's wrong?" Dawes asked.

"No. Except that he did say he's sick. Something about the automated doctor."

When they saw Cooper in the bedroom, though, he looked anything but immobilized. He was pacing wildly back and forth, and near his bureau was a dog stretched stiffly on the floor. "Nelson is dead!" he shouted. "You wouldn't even stop at a dog, Jackson, would you?" Tears were streaming down his face. "That's the best dog that ever lived."

"I don't know what I have to do with it," Jackson said, very nervous.

Cooper whirled, eyes out like knobs, toward Dawes. "You're

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no good either but you're an angel compared to that one. I want you to be my witness. Nelson saved my life tonight, Dawes. That's right, sacrificed his life for me. See, Jackson's so pale you'd think he was the dead one."

"But how could a dog—," protested Dawes.

Cooper stroked the brown-spotted terrier as if he were awakening him from sleep. "Nelson wasn't feeling very well this evening, whimpering. So I attached the automated doctor to his chest to get a reading. When I went over to the console and turned it on it electrocuted him! Now, you know as well as I do that it's impossible for the instrument to harm anyone unless it's been tampered with." He held up a miniature transmode bar. "It *was* tampered with. This jumped all the dozens of power safeguards and it was intended for me. And that's not all!" He pulled a disconnected taper from its hiding place in the wall. "This was busy recording my programmed death. He was going to get a show out of it, cook up some story about my wanting this last honor, respecting the wishes of the honorable suicide!"

Dawes stared at the taper. It fit easily into the center of Cooper's palm, the Jewel model which was the smallest ever developed. "Only a few people have Jewels," he said, glancing at the gauge reading. Most of the tape was still unused.

"Exactly! It's Jackson's work all right."

Jackson ran up to Cooper and grabbed him by the arm. "All right," he said, "why don't you tell our young friend how you had my apartment taped the other day and tried to have me Moleculided?"

"You were the one who always stole the ideas," Cooper shouted back. "There was the kid with the musical productions thirteen years ago. You bled his brain white, had him fired, blackballed him when I wanted to keep him on the payroll."

Dawes hastily opened the taper and withdrew the used run, then substituted one of the empty pickup reels. He flicked the hair switch on, slipped the device back in it's hidng place and stepped out of camera range.

"*You're* the one," Jackson was shrieking, still gripping the arm, "you're the one who needled Mr. Ralphson into a heart attack thirty years ago after he made us junior partners."

"But who planned it all?"

Their charges flew back and forth and they began shoving each other around the room. Dawes watched them nervously, hoping they wouldn't get out of taper range. He relaxed as they circled back, raining blows on each other's head. Cooper picked

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up an ashtray. "You're finished, Jackson," he said. "Dawes will testify you went beserk and this," he slammed him stunningly on the head, "was the only way to stop you. Why shouldn't he? He's getting your share."

"The shoe's on the other foot," Jackson said groggily, gathering enough strength to lunge a lamp stand into his jaw.

THEY both fell to the floor, unconscious. Dawes quickly took the taper from the wall again, withdrew the incriminating reel and then put the needle-holed device, reloaded, back. After he pocketed the tape he calmly attached the repaired automated doctor to Jackson's neck and took a synthesized reading, at the same time setting the doctor for central hospital alarm. There was no indication of incipient death but that wasn't too unfortunate; with the record of the quarrel in his pocket he could always control Jackson and certainly would get the needed shares. He unwound the doctor attachment and put it on Cooper's neck. There he had a purer form of luck. It indicated Cooper was almost totally paralyzed and would die within twelve hours. He was so far beyond saving that there would be no reason for the medical crew to shift him to the hospital.

Dawes stood up and leaned against the wall to await the crew's arrival. He was, he decided, incredibly lucky, so lucky that it was bound to last him all his long life. If Cooper and Jackson had been in reversed roles he could not be assured of a taper death scene record since it was not Jackson's apartment. Meanwhile, Jackson's living on would assure a smooth transfer of power, a 'voluntary' one.

Then, too, he was lucky not to have had Wright in his confidence. It would have been so unnecessary and he could hire all the young idea people he would ever need, people he would always know how to control. He wanted to cry out in the loudest hard sell voice available: *I'm on top of the heap, all by myself!* but it wouldn't do while the taper was on. A man really had to know at every step of the way how to keep an eye on himself.

As he turned back toward the two men on the floor he was momentarily startled to find Cooper's eyes staring unbelievingly up at him as if they belonged to another recording taper; but then he remembered the automatic doctor's categorical indication of almost total paralysis from now until death and turned again to the taper to make certain it was set to miss nothing, including those glittering eyes.

THE END

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The fey Mr. Young continues his scholarly researches in the scientific origins of our myth and legend with this tale of an agile—and avaricious—one-man

BOARDING PARTY

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by FINLAY

(Translator's note: *The original of the following report was recently acquired by the Terran Industrial Library through the Interstellar Historical Exchange Society, into whose illustrious fold the member nations of the Terran Economic Bloc have at last been admitted. The narrative is of primary interest to the library officials because it provides unequivocable proof that, long before the Interstellar Economic Community took official cognizance of our existence, several articles of Community Commerce found their way into our culture. To the layman, however, the narrative is of primary interest because it provides an intriguing parallel to a narrative of an altogether different nature.*)

TO: Interstellar Nurseries,
Frimm 4

FROM: Captain of the Greenship
Uxurient,
Urtz 2

SUBJECT(S): (1) Why the *Uxurient* put in to an out-of-bounds system during the Frimm 4-Urtz 2 run; (2) how a boarding party of one gained the green-deck and made off with a Uterium 5 snirk bird, a toy friddle-fork, and two containers of yellow trading disks; (3) why the *Uxurient's* flexible ship-to-ground capillary tube is ten exids shorter than it used to be.

(1)

Why the Uxurient put in to an Out-of-Bounds System during the Frimm 4-Urtz 2 Run

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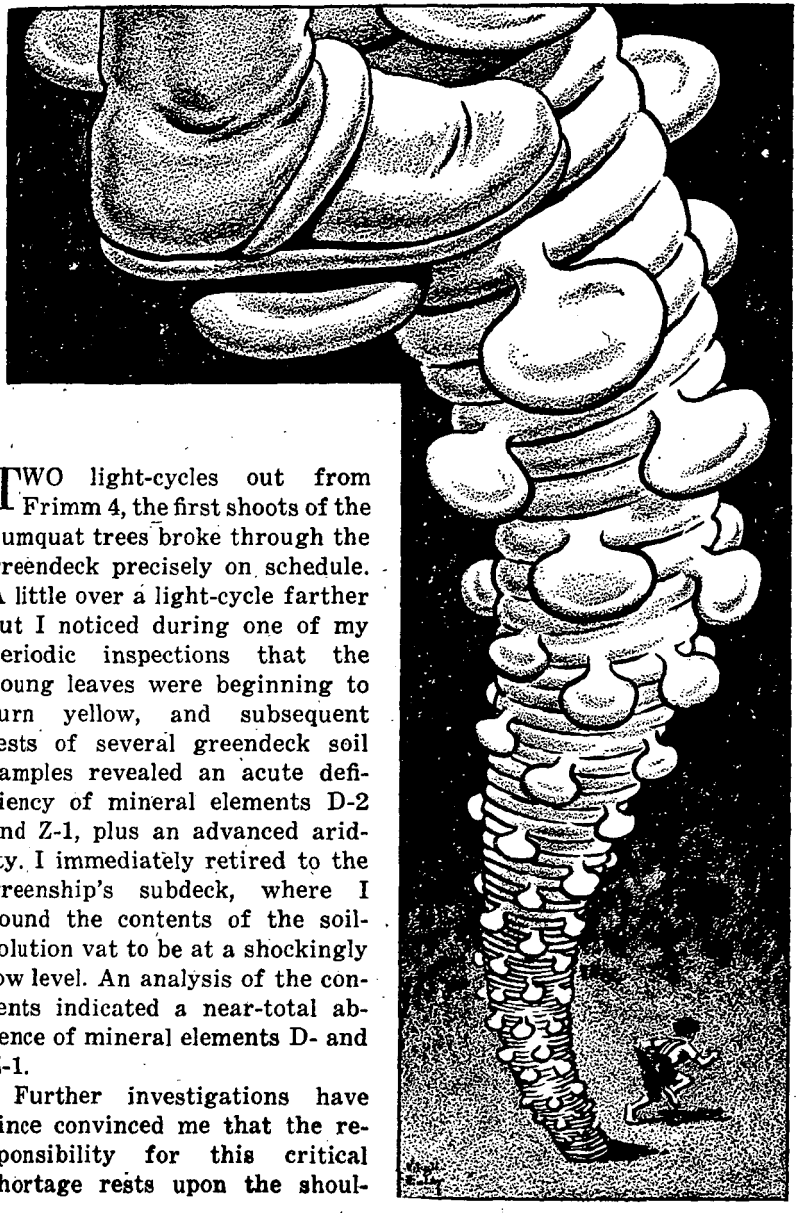

TWO light-cycles out from Frimm 4, the first shoots of the yumquat trees broke through the greendeck precisely on schedule. A little over a light-cycle farther out I noticed during one of my periodic inspections that the young leaves were beginning to turn yellow, and subsequent tests of several greendeck soil samples revealed an acute deficiency of mineral elements D-2 and Z-1, plus an advanced aridity. I immediately retired to the greenship's subdeck, where I found the contents of the soil-solution vat to be at a shockingly low level. An analysis of the contents indicated a near-total absence of mineral elements D- and Z-1.

Further investigations have since convinced me that the responsibility for this critical shortage rests upon the shoul-

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ders of none other than Ur-Lon-Ho-Lee, Interstellar Nurseries' senior shipping clerk, but at the time, the yumquat-tree shipment pre-empted my attention to the exclusion of all other matters. If the trees were to be allowed to shoot up at the usual accelerated growth rate and were to be delivered in satisfactory sapling stage to the Urtz 2 customer who had ordered them, I had but one course of action open to me: to put in to the nearest system, find a planet with a soil rich in moisture and rich in mineral elements D-2 and Z-1, and replenish the soil-solution vat by means of the *Uxurient's* ship-to-ground capillary tube. Fortunately, there happened to be a system in the vicinity of the *Uxurient*'s present position, but unfortunately it happened to be one of the many systems that are out-of-bounds to Interstellar Economic Community ships. Before coming to a decision, then, I had to weigh the importance of my mission against the risk of causing "a substantial interference in the normal evolution of an extra-Community culture" —a possibility that is always present when a Community ship is forced to enter an out-of-bounds system. I decided that it was my responsibility both to the customer and to the company to run this risk, and proceeded to put in to the system at once.

I wasted no time on the outer worlds, knowing from experience that such worlds rarely yield anything in the way of flora and hence could not possibly possess the kind of soil I needed, but arrowed in to the orbital regions of the first four. Perceiving at once that Four would not serve my purpose, I continued on to Three. Three turned out to be a Frimm 4-type planet in all respects save its slightly smaller size; it also turned out to be the reason for the system's having been placed out of bounds. I was not surprised: One seldom finds soil of the type employed by Frimm 4 nurseries without finding intelligent life in the immediate vicinity. In this instance, I used the term "intelligent life" in its broadest sense, for the several civilizations I transchecked at random revealed technologies not far removed from the paleolithic stage, and in one case, in the very midst of it.

ON several of the land masses I detected scattered deposits of the soil-type I needed, and I could have replenished the *Uxurient's* soil-solution vat from any of them. However, I chose an unusually rich one on a large island near the major land mass, reasoning that the less time I consumed in the operation, the less chance there would be of my occasioning "a substantial in-

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terference in the normal evolution of an extra-Community culture". This particular deposit bordered a small community of scattered, thatch-roofed dwellings, and abounded in trees similar to the yumquat species. After activating the *Uxurient's* ventral camouflage-unit, I brought the greenship down to about two hundred mirids, gravved it into position above the edge of the forest, and opened the capillary-tube lock. I timed my maneuver to coincide with the passing of the dusk belt, but, reluctant to attract any more attention than was absolutely necessary, I waited through most of the ensuing night phase before lowering the capillary tube. Unfortunately, I erred somewhat in my calculations, and the tube's rhizomorphous feeding system, owing partially to the rather strong wind that had sprung up during the night phase, entered the soil much closer to one of the native dwellings than I had intended should be the case; however, dawn being near at hand, I lacked sufficient time to recoil and relocate the device, so I left it where it was. I was not particularly worried: the natives' superstitious fear of the tube would probably preclude their approaching it closely enough for them to be able to damage it, and if their superstitious fear of the tube itself was not strong enough to make them keep their distance, their fear of the "low-lying cloud" from which the tube depended should be.

My mind at ease in this respect then, I reduced the opacity of the hull's upper hemisphere to complete transparency so that the greendeck would benefit from the rays of the system's sun, after which I retired to the subdeck to check on the first influx of nutrients into the soil-solution vat. The length of the capillary tube prohibited any immediate change in the solution-level, so while I waited, I busied myself checking the tubes that run down to the vat from the section of the greendeck where the upper extremities of the capillary tube are affixed. Next, I checked the outgoing tubes that feed the greendeck soil. By the time I finished, the level had begun to rise.

I waited till it rose above the halfway mark, then I took a sample and ran an analysis. The result delighted me: the D-2 and Z-1 mineral element content had quadrupled! If the rapidity with which the vat was filling continued, I would be able to disengage the capillary tube, recoil it, and be on my way before the next night phase.

I lingered for a while longer, watching the level climb. Finally, remembering that I had

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not eaten since before my discovery of the soil deficiency, I left the vat-room, picked up three lliaka hind quarters in the meat-compartment, attached them to my belt, and proceeded up the ramp to the greendeck. The thought of the fine steaks which the quarters would yield made me realize how truly hungry I was, and I set off across the greendeck toward my distant living quarters with quickened steps. As I walked, the sight of the arid soil stretching away in every direction afflicted me with melancholy, even though I knew that the deplorable condition was well on its way toward being corrected. The leaves of the baby yumquat trees, I saw to my dismay, had more than merely yellowed: they had shriveled too. And so scrawny were the little shoots that, had I not known that they were there, I might very well have walked in their midst and have been unaware of their existence. Indeed, the greendeck, awash now with bright morning sunlight, had more of the aspect of a desert than it did an aspect of a thriving oasis where plants are grown during shipment. I submit that my bringing the *Uxurient* in to an out-of-bounds system was more than merely justified: it was in keeping with the highest ideals that govern man in his relationship to plant-life.

(2)

How a Boarding Party of One gained the Greendeck and made off with a Uterium 5 Snirk Bird, a Toy Friddlefork, and Two Containers of Yellow Trading Disks.

ARRIVING at my living quarters, I removed my greendeck fatigues and laid them upon the arms of the rack beside the entrance, wondering as I always do on such occasions how Ho-Hat-Li-Tum, the company's morale manager, could have fallen for so blatantly whimsical an appointment as a clothes rack in the form of a life-size woman. Granted, greenship pilots lead lonely lives, but tell me this: how can the mere act of their laying their outer garments upon the outstretched arms of a brainless, speechless, feelingless mannequin in the least alleviate their loneliness? If Ho-Hat-Li-Tum were really concerned about the morale of the greenship pilots, he would spurn such halfway measures and concentrate his energies on getting the regulation that forbids pilots to take their wives into space with them rescinded.

To continue: Once in my living quarters, I proceeded directly to the galley were I cut two large steaks from one of the lliaka hindquarters. Placing the steaks upon the grill to sear, I

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got a loaf of bread and decanter of wine out of the provision closet, after which I set the table. When the steaks were done, I placed them on a large platter and sat down to eat. It was at this point that I received a very definite impression that I was being watched.

I looked around the galley. Other than myself, of course, no one was there, and certainly the various cupboards were much too small to harbor a secret onlooker. A secret onlooker indeed! Angry with myself, I put the matter from my mind, concluding that the condition of the yumquat trees had depressed me to a greater extent than I had realized, and that I had fallen prey to preposterous imaginings. I wish now that I had been less eager to ascribe what proved to be a perfectly valid psychosensory perception to my emotional letdown.

I ate ravenously, devouring both of the steaks and the entire loaf of bread. Afterward, a feeling of peace and good will stole over me, and on an impulse I called the Uterium 5 snirk bird down from its perch above the galley doorway and persuaded it by means of a crust of bread to perch upon my forefinger. Despite the large and ovoid xanthous droppings which these birds sporadically deposit on chairs, tables and floors, they make wonderful pets, and I envied the particular customer who was to receive this one—a tiny, bright-eyed female—as a partial bonus for his yumquat-tree order. The other components of his bonus—the toy friddlefork and the two containers of yellow trading disks—stood on a shelf just behind me, and reaching around and procuring them, I set them on the table before me. Such evidence of largess invariably renews my faith in the company, and on long runs I often get out customer bonuses and speculate on the munificence of a concern such as ours. Thus I speculated now—but not for long. I had not slept for nearly two zodal periods and was far more tired than I realized, and to complicate matters, the heavy meal which I had just consumed had had a soporific effect upon me. Almost before I knew it, I dozed off.

I believe that my first apprisal that the previously mentioned psychosensory perception had not been illusory after all was the creak of one of the cupboard doors. Unfortunately, this apprisal was on the unconscious, rather than the conscious, level, and failed to arouse me from my stupor. It took the hysterical cackling of the Uterium 5 snirk bird, a few moments later, to bring me back to true awareness,

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and by that time, it was too late. The tiny man who had shinned up the table leg and seized the snirk bird, the two containers of yellow trading disks, and the toy friddlefork had already regained the deck and was running toward the doorway. In the process of climbing back down, he must have bumped the toy friddlefork and accidentally activated its tonal unit, for it was bleating away insistently as he bore it away. Indeed, so insistent were its cries that one would have thought that it expected me to come after it and succor it.

Incredulously, I got to my feet. I saw then that the thief was not a man, but a boy—the tiniest boy that I have ever seen in my whole life. Assuming his stature to be average, it is unlikely that even a full-grown adult of his species would come any higher than a Frimm 4's citizen's kneecap!

I called after him, uttering my name in as gentle a tone of voice as I could manage and assuring him that if he would return the articles he had stolen no harm would come to him. He only ran the faster, and fairly streaked through the galley doorway, down the entrance corridor, and out onto the green-deck. I had no choice but to set off in pursuit, and this I did, naively believing that I could overtake him easily. In this I erred indeed. Never have I ever seen anyone run so fast. Why, there were times when I could have sworn that his feet weren't even touching the deck!

As I lumbered along in his wake, I wondered how he could conceivably have gotten on board. Had he climbed the capillary tube? This didn't seem possible in view of the *Uxurient's* altitude and in view of his diminutiveness, but I could think of no other answer. There was no need for me to, I saw presently: that he had climbed up the tube was unequivocably demonstrated by the ease and the celerity with which he now began to climb down it.

(3)

Why the Uxurient's *Flexible Ship-to-Ground Capillary Tube is now Ten Exids Shorter than It used to be*

LOATH to give up the chase, I started climbing down the tube myself. This is not as difficult as one would at first imagine —as I myself had imagined, in fact, prior to making the attempt. The branch-like protuberances that absorb the sunlight and transmute it into the energy required for the capillary-action provide numerous hand- and footholds, and had it not been for the almost gale-force wind that had developed, my descent would

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have been relatively easy. Even with the wind, I found myself in no great danger, and I have no doubt but what I would have reached the ground in due course had I not underestimated the resourcefulness—and the blood-thirstiness—of my youthful quarry. He kept calling out repeatedly at the top of his voice, but I did not suspect what he was up to until, halfway down, I paused and looked below me. I was just in time to see a woman run out of the thatch-roofed dwelling near which the tube had rooted itself and hand him a small object the very moment his feet touched the ground.

I deduced from the shards of sunlight that the object threw off that it was a cutting tool of some kind. I was not long left in doubt in any event, for no sooner did the boy have it in his possession than he began to wield it. A series of thuds was borne upward by the wind, and with each thud, the tube gave a convulsive shudder. I had seen unattached ship-to-ground capillary tubes at the mercy of the wind before, and I knew the danger that confronted me. Consequently I began climbing back up toward the *Uxurient* at once. While I will not attempt to deny that I was frightened, I would like to point out that it wasn't so much my predicament that frightened me, but the cold-blooded attitude of the young savage below me. He thought that by severing the tube he could bring it crashing to the ground, and the ferocity and the frequency of his blows testified to the eagerness with which he awaited my destruction.

It was his very attitude, I believe, that gave me the strength and the determination to gain the *Uxurient* after the tube broke free and began lashing wildly back and forth. For a long while I lay gasping on the green-deck; then, when my breath came back, I recoiled the tube, secured the tube-look, and lifted into space. The soil-solution vat was not as full as I would have wished, but by careful rationing I knew that I could make its contents suffice. Whether I could or not, I wanted no more part of the world I had just left. I never want to see the place again.

* * *

I WOULD like to append a word in my defense. While it is true that I was instrumental in exposing an extra-Community culture to a technology far beyond its ken, it must be remembered that all such cultures are flexible in nature and can absorb the seemingly inexplicable with the utmost equanimity. They achieve this quite simply by identifying the unfamiliar with the familiar, and by ascribing those phenomena which happen

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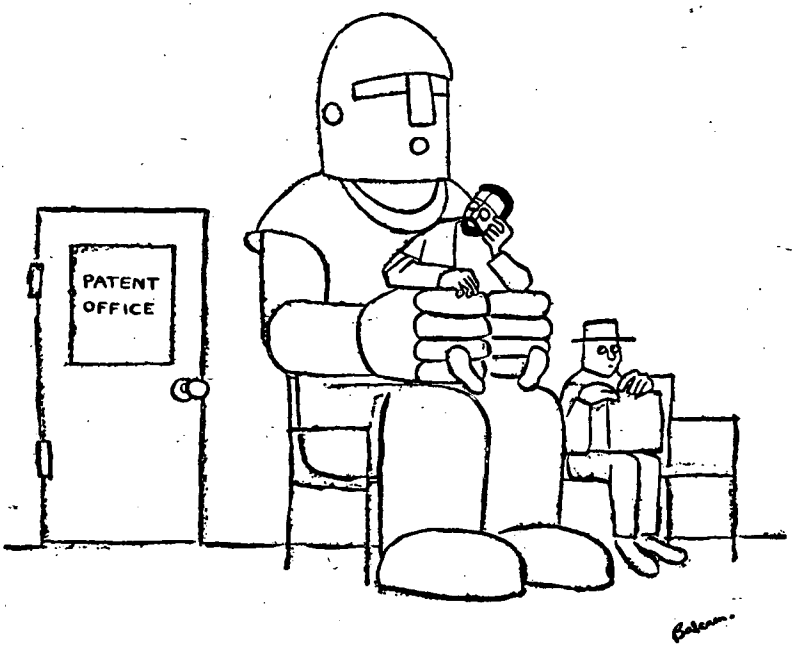
to be beyond their experience to the workings of magic. Far from having an adverse effect, the present instance will, I am sure, provide the basis for a colorful legend. No doubt the legend will acquire a more satisfying ending, and unquestionably the boy's exploits will be exaggerated. As regards the Uterium 5 snirk bird, the toy friddlefork, and the two containers of yellow trading disks, you may be sure that the young rascal had already identified them with objects with which he was familiar (and which he coveted) before he left the galley cupboard in which he was hiding. If he had not done so, he would not have stolen them. In any case, I am not unduly bitter about their loss, even though I must make that loss good. The measure of a Frimm 4 citizen's true worth is the quantity of his magnanimity; hence I hope that both the boy and the woman—probably his mother—live happily ever after.

(signed)
Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum

THE END



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THE SPACE BREED

By ADAM CHASE

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

On the basis of our suddenly accelerated rate of scientific progress, your children's children may well live on another planet. An actual concept of such a life is difficult to get. For instance, can you conceive living in a world where the life or death of your child hinged on the capacity of a portable oxygen tank? The strength of a plastic helmet? A world where distance is not measured in miles but in buckets of liquid air? This is a story of such a world and of tomorrow's children.

WHEN the big day arrived, Wisconsin Philips and his sister Pauline had disappeared.

Wis was ten years old, and since this was the tenth anniversary of the Sirius Four colony Wis had a certain amount of fame as the first child born eight light years from Earth. He liked to say he was conceived in space, not that he knew precisely or even approximately what that meant, but he had heard some of the grownups at the colony say that, and the mysterious term appealed to his imagination.

Pauline, two years younger than Wis, was one of the four hundred babies born so far under the big dome of Sirius IV. Their dog Orion, who disappeared with them, was four years old—which made Orion, an improbable mixture of beagle and doberman, the only mature member of the trio.

The reason no one could find them on the big day was because they had gone outside the dome.

Pauline had been frightened, but Wis taunted her until she went along with him. They had been outside before, but only in the company of grownups. They had their own pint-sized spacesuits and, of course, even the domestic animals of the Sirius IV colony had spacesuits. For one thing, the liquid air aqueduct was still being built, which meant that going outside for buckets of air was still a necessary occupation of the colonists; and a kid, like anyone else, could tote a bucket.

But on the big day, Wis, Pauline and Orion didn't go outside to the Air River. They just went outside because Wis wanted to.

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With adventure ahead, the danger was forgotten.

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And on the big day, all going outside meant was that you crossed an imaginary line, for that was the day the plastite dome was lifted.

It had to be lifted because the big day on Sirius Four was the day the first new ship came from distant Earth. Wis hadn't really expected to go wandering off. His father, John Philips, was chairman of the Greeting Committee; his mother Patricia was in charge of baking. The big day was the day seventy-five new colonists from far earth arrived at Sirius Four.

Wis hadn't known what to expect. The spaceship, though, was a disappointment—just an enormous, almost featureless projectile. And the new colonists, as they filed off and trooped, wearing spacesuits, into the farm-city, were a disappointment. Why, Wis thought, they looked like anybody. Just like anybody.

While all along his father had been briefing him proudly on the meaning of the new arrivals from Earth. "It means we're here to stay, son," he had said the night before. Of course they were there to stay, Wis thought in mild exasperation. Could they be anything else? There wasn't a single spaceship in the entire colony, except the original one which had been dismantled to build the farm city.

"It means Sirius Four is a success," John Philips had also told his ten-year-old son. "It means that though we're now restricted to this little area a few square miles in extent, some day we'll carve a home for humanity on the entire planet." Then he said, pointing through the transparent dome which, the night before the big day, was still up: "Out there, son, there's a whole new world waiting to be explored, waiting to be tamed, waiting to be conquered by man. Someday we're going to do it. Someday, maybe your children's children will do it."

It was the thought of the new world adventure that really excited Wis. It sounded like a fine idea, this exploration: Wis didn't see why he couldn't do it now.

It was then that Patricia Philips, her hands white with flaky dough, came into the room and made a mistake. The mistake was in saying: "John, he doesn't understand what you're trying to say. He's too young."

Wis didn't think he was too young. With the other children born after him Wis had seen the pictures of the early days of the colony, the dismantling of the ship, the setting up of the farm-city—which really was a gigantic hydroponics laboratory with living quarters—the erection of the plastite dome. There didn't seem to be a thing they did in the pictures that Wis himself could not do.

So on the big day, when the dome was shut off and all the grownups were busy with preparations for the new arrivals, Wis put on his spacesuit, Pauline reluctantly put on hers, they both

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dressed Orion, and outside they went.

Pauline had good reason to be reluctant. In the first place, all the children at the colony had the dangers of airlessness and two hundred degrees below zero temperature drummed into them. "You couldn't survive out there a minute without protection," they were told. "There's no air to breathe, and no one can live unless he breathes. Also, the terrible cold will freeze you to ice in seconds. Why, even the oxygen of this planet is frozen."

That was one thing. The other was the Taggles.

Although the Taggles were a bogey-man sort of danger to the children of the colony, they were another reason Wis decided to go outside and do some exploring on his own. For Taggles wasn't really their name, their name was all but unpronouncable, and Wis, the oldest child in the colony, had tried to approximate the sound of it at age four with the word Taggle. The name had stuck. No one, not even adults, called the original inhabitants of Sirius Four anything but Taggles now. Didn't that give Wis a certain proprietary right to exploration?

"The Taggles," John Philips had told his children, "are a mystery. We don't know much about them, you understand, except that they've been mighty good to us. Our home planet Earth, you see, was overcrowded. So, when we started out for Sirius Four, a thousand other expeditions started out for a thousand other unexplored places. Many of them had to go back because the native populations were hostile, a few of them were even wiped out. Why, on Fomalhaut Seven—"

"Dear—" a gentle nudge from the wife in question—"tell him about the Taggles."

"Well, yes. Sure. The Taggles lived here before we did, son. They lived here about a million years before we did. It's their planet, and they're good enough to let us share it."

"Are they afraid of us, Pop?"

"Afraid? No, of course not. There are so few of us, it would not be any trouble for them to wipe us out, like what happened on Fomalhaut Seven. That's why we have to be nice to them. In a way, though, we're lucky. Because the Taggles aren't matter-converters."

"Huh?"

"Well, that is, they don't eat food. They eat energy. So, theoretically, we could cultivate every acre of their planet—and it is their planet, make no mistake about that—and they would not mind. They're a funny lot, though. We've been here ten years and we hardly know a thing about them. They keep to themselves and—"

"Dear, you're forgetting the whole point—"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. They're big and strong and they can work magic, especially on little children. That's why it isn't safe to

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go outside alone, except maybe for a bucket of air if you're told to. Because of the Taggles."

All these circumstances conspired to send ten-year-old Wis Philips outside on the first real opportunity. Not that he intended to go *far*. Gee whiz, he knew better. It had been drummed into his head that the air supply in a spacesuit was good for only ten hours. Just a little walk, that's all, especially since he had a baby like Pauline with him, who was so scared she almost puckered and broke into tears when they crested the first rise and dropped into the first little valley, thus cutting off all view of the farm-city. . . .

"John, have you seen Wis?"

"No. Isn't he with you and Pauline?"

"No." Alarmed. "I thought Pauline was with Wis and you."

"Well, they'll turn up. Why don't we send Orion to fetch them. Here, Orion! Here, boy!"

"Orion?" Frightened now. "Where's Orion?"

Orion, actually, was the trouble. Maybe Wis wouldn't have gone very far, except for Orion. Certainly Pauline would have been delighted to return at once. She practically begged Wis, but he wouldn't hear of it at first.

And then, when even he began to get a little anxious because the convoluted terrain, frozen, bleak, had long-since hidden the farm-city from view, Orion ran off.

"Hey, Orion! Hey, come back here, boy! Hey, Orion, come *on*!"

But Orion yiped playfully and scampered off.

Sure-footedly over a thrusting ridge and down the other side out of sight. Barking and yelping with delight, as if he had waited all the interminable span of his dog-life just for this moment.

"Wis, I'm scared."

"Come on." Running. "We can't just *leave* him here."

"Wis, I wanta go back."

"Sissy!"

Wis ran after the dog. Pauline choked on tears and followed him. "Wait for me. Wait, Wis, pleeeze!" In her mind's eye, Pauline was thinking of Taggles. Not that she knew what they looked like.

They chased Orion for about an hour. It's problematical what Orion was chasing or thought he was chasing, for not counting farm-city, the only life-form on Sirius Four were the energy eating Taggles, and neither Wis, Pauline nor Orion had seen any Taggles yet.

That was to come later.

Finally, Orion spent his playful energy. Tail wagging ridiculously inside the spacesuit, he waited for them. Wis wanted to scold the dog, but tongue hanging inside his helmet, flanks heaving, eyes sparkling, Orion looked so pleased with himself that Wis relented.

"All right, boy," he said, feeling very grown up. "You've had your fun. Now let's go back."

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This time Wis held the spacesuit leash in a tight grip.

"I'm tired, Wis. All these mountains."

"Hills, silly. If you climbed a mountain," said Wis in a superior manner, "you'd know it."

Two more hours, back the way they had come. At least Wis thought it was the way they had come. But two hours to cover the ground they had covered before in one hour.

And no farm-city in sight anywhere.

Just the convoluted, lifeless ground, of Sirius Four. Just the black velvet of the airless sky with its incredible sprinkling of stars. Just the emptiness and the desolation all around them.

Pauline started to cry.

Wis looked at her, the tears streaming down her cheeks inside the helmet she wore. "I want to go back," she said. "I want to go *home*. I don't want to explore. Wis, take me back."

Wis wanted to say, "Ya big baby," but he didn't. He was getting a little scared himself. Straight ahead of them looked like right in back of them. The saw-toothed hills on their left looked just like the saw-toothed hills on their right. There wasn't any farm-city in sight anywhere. Of course, if the dome was up they could see it a long way off. But the dome was shut off and all the colonizers and all their animals wore spacesuits. It was the only way to let the new colonists and their equipment in, since the dome's airlock admitted only a couple of people at a time.

Everywhere you looked, it was the same. Rock. Sharp-edged hills. Percipitous gullies.

Wis knew suddenly they were lost.

"I want to go *home*!" Pauline repeated, snuffling her tears. "You take me right home, Wis Philips."

So, holding Pauline's hand through her space-glove, with Orion now trailing obediently behind on his leash, Wis started walking.

The sensible thing to do would have been to wait in one spot until the dome went back up, because as yet they couldn't be too far away, even if they had gone outward in one direction all three hours they'd been runaways, which was certainly unlikely.

But Wis didn't do the sensible thing. Pauline was scared and crying. And Wis didn't want to admit he was almost as scared as she was. He couldn't do that, could he? He was ten years old.

He walked. Pauline, sniffing, walked with him. Orion seemed very happy.

They walked about an hour.

After an hour was when Wis realized they came back to where they started from. There was a hill that looked like three teeth biting into the black sky, Wis remembered. And there it was again.

"I think we're lost," Wis said.

He shouldn't have said it, but it just came out. Pauline began to bawl, really in earnest now.

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So Wis said he was joking. His kid-sister hated him right then and freely admitted it: This made Wis ornery. He wouldn't give up. They kept walking.

Five hours after they started out, they found the city.

It didn't look like any city Wis had ever seen in pictures. It was a Taggle City, almost a million years old because the Taggles were an ancient race, but Wis didn't know that yet. It was a place, about a mile square, where the saw-toothed hills had been flattened out, where the ground had been polished utterly flat and smooth. It looked like a gigantic billiard table. Which meant, as Wis was soon to learn, that the city was underground.

Right in the middle of it, just as Wis, Pauline and Orion reached the spot, the smooth rock parted and rolled back and a trap-door opened.

Pauline screamed: "Taggle!"

And she was right.

There were two Taggles there suddenly, and they were almost as scared as Pauline, probably more scared than Wis. They didn't *look* like much, really, Wis thought, even though he knew they were Taggles. How could they look like much? They were energy-eaters. They were quite insubstantial. If the ectoplasm superstitious people claim ghosts are made of is sort of fuzzy, sort of half-transparent, sort of weightless-looking and kind of glowing, then the Taggles looked like ghosts.

"It's Men!" the first one cried in silent telepathic excitement. "You want to go back and get help?"

"They seem harmless enough," the second Taggle said a little doubtfully. This second Taggle was more optimistic because ten Earth years ago he had been on the Council which allowed the Outworlders, Men, they were called, to colonize Sirius Four. There was just no reason for matter-eaters and energy-eaters to be in conflict. They could inhabit the same planet in perfect harmony. He repeated: "They seem harmless enough. They aren't armed."

"What's the one with four walking limbs?" the first Taggle wanted to know. He was uneasy.

"I don't know. I guess it's a child and the other two are adults. Why don't you ask them?"

"Who, me? Why don't *you*?"

The Taggles were a very shy people. Once granting colonization rights to the Men who had come from space, they had scrupulously ignored their guests on Sirius Four. They were a very ancient race and had had a considerable civilization at a time that saw Men still swinging through trees on Earth. They were a naturally inquisitive people and had, in fact, achieved scientific wonders. But being insubstantial energy-eaters, these wonders just weren't necessary and the Taggles had never exploited them.

"Hello!" the second Taggle,

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unwilling to admit his own uneasiness, thought, projecting telepathically. "Are you the leaders of the colony?" Naturally, they would be the leaders. Only the leaders would come out personally to make contact with the Taggles.

Wis warmed to the occasion as he heard the words in his mind. And he wanted desperately to prove to Pauline she had nothing to cry about. So, while he didn't wish to lie and hence didn't answer their question directly, he did say, grandiloquently: "I am the only one ever conceived in space!"

Being insubstantial energy-eaters, the Taggles didn't have any idea, any more than did Wis, of what "conceived in space" meant. But it impressed them. Hadn't Men come through space to Sirius Four?

"Be the guest of our city," offered the second Taggle, giving the first one a look of triumph because the Men were so friendly and so obviously not hostile. Even the first Taggle felt better.

What they did not know, was that Wis, Pauline and Orion now had only five or six hours air supply left. After that they would die of asphyxiation. And Wis, in his excitement, forgot all about it.

They were taken on a tour of Taggle City, which had about a thousand inhabitants. They were told — and shown — wonders. They understood almost nothing, but Wis was enjoying himself immensely, and occasionally a glimmering of what he saw and was told got through to him.

"This is our energizer. It draws energy directly from Sirius. We feed on it since we're energy-eaters. Of course, you have different problems. But Sirius-power — sun-power — is still a very great achievement, even for you. It could grow your crops, work your dome, build your cities, power your spaceships . . ."

An hour passed. Four hours of air—and life—left.

"These murals show you what we once were like, five million years ago. You are surprised? But you see, we too once were matter-eaters. Then our planet died. We had an option. Like you, we could go out into space. Or, we could convert ourselves to energy-eaters and stay here. We selected the latter course. You see, once we were not too unlike yourselves."

Wis and Pauline gazed in fascination at the tri-de murals. Another hour passed. Three hours left of air—and life.

"We could have told you all this before," said their Taggle guide. "But we're a shy people, and you seemed so busy in your dome, we didn't want to bother you. We don't, you see, wish to intrude. But—and I hope you won't think this is presumptuous —in our long history we've made some discoveries which could probably help you. For example . . ." The Taggle went on telepathically about something

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called hyper-space which Wis didn't understand at all. ". . . for us, you see, it was merely a theoretical discovery. We are not wanderers, as you Men are. We have no wish to leave our native planet. But still, with the hyper-drive, it would be possible for a ship to go from here to Earth in days instead of years. Quite a savings in . . ."

That didn't interest Wis. A long space voyage sounded like fun, so why shorten it?

Two hours left of air—and life.

"Also," went on the Taggle, leading them before a tremendous machine which dwarfed the considerable cavern that housed it, "this device was developed—five million years ago—as a third alternative. We could leave our home planet, we could convert to energy-status, or we could make our world inhabitable by matter-eaters again. You see, this device taps the radioactive core of the world, bringing heat from below instead of above. Sufficient heat would melt the seas of oxygen, give this world an atmosphere, and make completely feasible once more habitation by matter-eaters, such as we once were or such as you now are. But we're a passive people, which is why we never contacted you after you came and we agreed that you could stay. Which is why, instead of heating the planet and bringing air back, we decided to become energy-eaters . . ."

One hour left of air—and life.

Then Wis suddenly blurted. "Air? Did you say air?" He began to get very excited. "My gosh, I almost forgot. We've got to get *back*. We've got to. I have to explain, I didn't want to admit it before, but we aren't grown-ups. We're just a couple of kids and a dog and—"

"Dog? What is dog?"

So Wis had to explain it. Then he said: "We're not leaders or anything. We're just kids. We're lost. We don't know how to get back. But if we don't get back soon, we're gonna die because we won't have any air to breathe."

"That," Pauline wailed, "is what daddy said! I knew it, I knew you'd get us in trouble, Wis Philips. I hate you!"

The Taggles didn't know what to make of this. They were energy-eaters, they were almost immortal, for five million years they had had no children. They debated it for a while. And kept on debating it, not knowing if this was some kind of joke the two Men were playing. . . . After all, interstellar humor could be wide of the accepted mark, and . . .

Half an hour left of air—and life.

"Children. Perhaps . . ."

"Yes, of course. Remember, in the ancient legends . . ."

"Immature beings, not fully—but not fully what?"

"Explain, please," one of them asked Wis.

He tried to explain. He could not make himself understood,

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though. And by the time he finished he was barely coherent. He knew they were in trouble. Bad trouble. If they didn't get back in a few minutes . . .

Fifteen minutes left of air—and life.

"I'm hungry," Pauline said. "I'm thirsty. I wanta go *home*."

The Taggles had to dredge racial history for the meanings of hungry and thirsty.

"We need air," Wis insisted. "We're not like you. We'll die without air."

"Very well," said the Taggle who'd been their guide, "then we'll present our machine to your people. It means nothing to us if the planet is warmed, if oxygen vaporizes again after five million years."

"No, I mean now!"

Already Wis could hear the final faint hiss which meant his emergency tank was empty. He began to feel dizzy. Pauline looked very pale. Orion had stopped nipping around their spaceboots and sat forlornly on his haunches.

The Taggles knew about air only theoretically, after five million years. But one of them brightened. "Ah, you mean you wish to try out the machine?"

"No, no, no!" Wis shouted. "I mean we need oxygen, right now." His vision began to swim. With an effort of will he kept himself from crying.

Then he broke down. He admitted it. He was just a kid. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't do anything. If they didn't get help, and fast, he and his sister and the dog were going to die.

That way, as a child admitting he was a child, Wis got through to them. One of the Taggles rushed outside for some liquid air. It was sloshed into their oxygen tanks—and only just in time. The heat of their spacesuits immediately vaporized it, and Wis felt the giddy rush of air, too heavily laden with oxygen, but life-giving nonetheless.

He did a little jig. He felt great. He didn't know it, but he had an oxygen jag.

"Children," telepathized one of the Taggles. "But I don't understand. Their adults—parents? —remained aloof of us. But the children came."

"Yes," said another. "But we remained aloof of them, and our culture is far older than Man's. Perhaps it takes a child, with the guileless mentality of a child, with the sense of wonder and imagination of a child. . . . In a sense, weren't their parents who came here ten years ago, more like children, with their dreams and hope and . . . I don't know . . ." Here the telepathy grew hazy for Wis, and he lost most of its meaning; but he did understand this much: "What I mean is, we were too old. We settled back passively, accepting defeat at the hands of our environment because it was the easiest way out. But Men didn't. They were—racially—children.

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They had a sense of wonder. They came here. We were too old, but they weren't. With their immaturity but their imagination, they came here, don't you understand? They were something we couldn't be. They were young enough: they were the space breed. . . ."

There was more which Wis couldn't follow. Then: "Working together, with our achievements and their unconquerable drive, what might we not accomplish? And it took these children to make us realize . . . come, let's take them home."

And they all went up and outside.

The dome over farm-city was back in place. The new colonists had all been accounted for, but there was grief in the colony—for two children, fourteen hours missing, were assumed dead. It was the first such accident in the history of the colony and it seemed an unpropitious event with which to confront the new colonists.

It was worse than that for John Philips and his wife Patricia. It was tragedy.

But John Philips wouldn't give up hope.

That was why he was outside the dome when the Taggles appeared.

Not just a few of them. Hundreds.

Descending on the colony.

With Wis, Pauline and Orion in their van.

After that there was much celebrating and the beginning of understanding between the Taggles, who were very old, and the Men, who were still very young. The Taggles could supply wonders, and the Men would know how to use them.

A cold planet turned warm, air again, the hyper-drive to bridge the vast interstellar gulf. . . .

Meanwhile, though, John Philips and the others would still go out for their buckets of air while Wis and children like him would play with their dogs and dream. This was what John Philips thought the day after the Taggles arrived and Wis and Pauline came back, as if miraculously, from the dead. As he entered the dome he saw Wis playing with Orion in a big discarded oxygen cylinder from the new ship. Wis and the dog were having a great time; the events of yesterday were forgotten.

And tomorrow beckoned, thanks to Wis. But he didn't understand that yet.

THE END

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very small very fine

By HENRY SLESAR

Will even the Dread Moment have its satisfaction for some?

A WHOLE CARNY can wake up in a bad temper. One rain-swept night and misty morning can do it, the tent flaps muddied along the bottom edges, the ground black and sodden along the midway. But Mr. Inch, the midget, greeted every day with a scowl, rain or shine, good or bad, his tiny face puckered and shriveled by a lifetime of angry grimace, the mouth a twisted bitter underline to his inconsequential nose. When Saturday dawned, a foul, muggy, leaden Saturday, promising a tragic beginning to the carnival's run, he got out of the miniature bed in the trailer and found no coffee in the vacuum can. He hurled the empty tin at the sleeping figure of his pregnant wife, Violetta. Eight months ago, when they had been married, he had woken her with a kiss.

"You shrimp rat," she moaned, hiding her face in the pillow. Her face was the size and texture of a white chrysanthemum. She was a gentle creature, who never resented being born into a six-foot world, but she found her husband's tantrums trying.

"I'm going out," he grumbled at her. "Maybe I can get a decent cup of coffee someplace."

"From the Biggies?" she said mockingly.

"Yes, from the Biggies! The damn Biggies!"

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He stormed out of the trailer, a small violent squall. He hated asking anything of the Biggies, the normal-sized members of the carny troupe. He had begun life hating the Biggies, and would end life hating the Biggie priest who would put pennies on his eyes. He went for a walk on the muddy terrain that had been chosen as a carnival site, his small hands thrust into his small pockets, his small eyes bright with undirected anger at the large, unfriendly world.

"Hey, shrimpo," a voice said behind him. He turned and saw Lazlo, the strong man. He spat on the ground, and Lazlo laughed. "What's the matter, shrimpo? You don't look happy today. Rain got you down?"

"Better get inside," Mr. Inch snarled. "The rain might melt that butter brain of yours, Lazlo."

"You want a piggy-back, shrimpo?" Lazlo chuckled. "You want to go for a ride, little man?"

The tired, tired jest never failed its purpose. Mr. Inch shrieked and hurled himself at the strong man. Lazlo guffawed, and held him off with one enormous paw. Mr. Inch flailed the air wildly, never reaching the brutish chin. Then Lazlo pushed him away, and went up the steps of the trailer, still chortling.

Mr. Inch screamed hatred at him until his cries brought Piney, the carny owner, out of his office. Piney as usual, exuded strong wine fumes, but his face was sober and frowning. "Cut it out," he growled. "Cut it out, will ya? Half the folks are still asleep. What's the matter with you, Inch?"

"Me? *Me?*" Mr. Inch said indignantly. "Nothing the matter with me, you big cheese. You big piece of dung."

"All right now, cut that out. I'm sick of you and your grudges, Inch, so cut it out. You're gettin' to be a real trouble-maker, you know that?"

"Why do you blame me?" Mr. Inch whined. "Why don't you blame Lazlo? Or the rest of 'em? Why do you always pick on me? Because I'm *small?* Is that it?"

"I wouldn't care if you were ten feet ten. Now get back to your trailer or I'll fine you."

"I don't want to go back," Mr. Inch said, drawing himself up. "I was going someplace."

"Where?"

"To see Curtin. That's where. I was just going to see my *friend,* Curtin."

"Friend? That's a laugh." Piney had lost interest in the argument; it was too familiar. He waved a thick hand at the midget, and plodded back to his office. "Go on, go on," he said. "Do what you want."

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Mr. Inch smiled grimly, and headed for Tim Curtin's diggings.

The faded letters on the trailer side read: BURIED ALIVE! In the misty rain, the yellow capitals appeared green and bilious. Mr. Inch rapped on the door, and when Tim Curtin opened it, the midget sniffed at the heavy aroma of brewing coffee. Curtin was a Biggie blackard like the rest of them, but he made good coffee and was free with it. He was a red-necked, slow-witted fellow with squinting eyes, and he made a great thing of his Irish congeniality. But Mr. Inch knew the limits of Curtin's good will: it ended at the five-foot-mark. He was a Biggie, and weren't all Biggies the same?"

"Well," Curtin smiled, showing teeth as yellow-green as his billboard. "You're just in time, Inch. Just put on a nice big pot of coffee."

"Thanks," Mr. Inch said, between clenched teth. "You're a real pal, Tim."

"Always got a cup of coffee for a friend," Curtin said. "You don't mind using a—" He picked up a normal-sized mug, and Mr. Inch growled and snatched it from his hand. "No, of course not," Curtin laughed. "You like a lot of coffee, don't you, Inch?"

When the steaming cup was in his hands, Mr. Inch tried to pay for it with conversation. He asked about the Exhibit, the leaden tomb into which Tim Curtin lowered himself at the beginning of every carnival, remaining there as long as three and four weeks for the edification of the yokels, surviving on piped-in air and stored food and drink. It wasn't a terribly popular sideshow, but there were always a few visitors willing to part with a quarter to see a man in a lead box, hoping, perhaps, that they would witness his sudden suffocating death. Curtin grumbled about the Exhibit, as he always did; he was thinking about a new act, as he always was, something clean and above ground, something that would better his way of life. Mr. Inch listened with solemn sympathy, not hearing, and not caring. Why should he care about a Biggie's problems?

He stayed in Curtin's trailer for half an hour, and then returned to Violetta. She was up and dressed, in a longish maternity robe she had sewn for herself. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but her voice gave no sign of past or present tears. She had borrowed a can of coffee from a neighbor, and the pot was bubbling on the heating unit. Mr. Inch was moved to sudden compassion, and he put his arms about her expanded waist. Forgiving, she held him close.

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"You're very small," he whispered to her. "Very small, very fine."

He went outside again at ten, and watched the inevitable stray dogs and children snooping hopefully around the carny site. The sky was still leaden, but a surprising glow appeared over the east horizon. The sudden appearance of what might be sunlight filled his tiny body with a rising emotion he couldn't name. "Oh, you damn Biggies," he muttered, tears filling his eyes. "Oh, you goddamn Biggies," Mr. Inch said. The horizon glow vanished for a moment, and then reappeared, brighter then before. But now there were two of them, and for a while, he thought he was witnessing some heat phenomenon, some electrical trick of nature. The rattling, rumbling sound came later, shaking the earth under his feet, making the carny trailers jump and squeak and bounce in the mud. The carny folk started coming out then, their faces baffled, and when the third burst of light came from the south, they began to run, crying, scrambling, panicked, afraid. Mr. Inch couldn't understand why, not even when the fourth light-burst, more brilliant and noisier than the others, came from the north, when the women began screaming and the men shouting, and the dogs barked and yipped and ran with lowered tails for a safety zone they could no longer find. The air was filled with sound, human and inhuman, and overiding all was the crackling, thunderous ovation from the clouds. The sky was black now, black and churning, and the rain was like dripping mud, and it was then that Mr. Inch knew that nature, the nature he knew and understood, wasn't responsible for what was happening in the sky that morning. He turned and went back into the trailer and found Violetta on the floor, clutching her swollen stomach with one hand and the cot with the other, looking pitiful and helpless as a child. He yelled at her, but she didn't seem to hear him, and the trailer jolted and shook, the dishes falling from the shelves. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to the doorway; she fought him for a while, and then succumbed, sobbing. He pushed her down the steps and into the street, leading her away from the clatter and demolition that was taking place inside their tiny house on wheels. They ran aimlessly together, until Mr. Inch saw Tim Curtin wandering around like a madman, whimpering with fright and indecision. He shouted to Curtin, but the big man didn't hear. Then he remembered about the Buried Alive exhibit, and the thought of the shelter it would afford triggered hope in his

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small body. He dragged Violetta towards it, but when she saw what he wanted her to do, she pulled away from him and shook her head violently. He persisted, until she had no choice, allowing him to lower her the five feet into the leaden coffin below the ground, and then followed her.

They were in the tomb for almost three days, until the sky overhead seemed less threatening, and the sounds above them had stilled. Only then did Mr. Inch emerge, cautiously, to learn that all living things had been erased from the world. Only then did he realize the great, wonderful truth of the cataclysm, and he laughed until Violetta cried in fear and hugged her swollen belly as he tried to tell her of the magnificent gift from the Gods, the gift that had made the earth the inheritance of not the meek, but the very small.

THE END

"Seen my snakeskin belt, mom?"

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Half a loaf is better than none. Or, to put it another way, how many jelly beans can you get in...

A JAR OF JELLY BEANS

By FRANKLIN GREGORY

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

IT SEEMED somehow appropriate to Justin that it was a little child who would finally save the world; since, broadly speaking, it was the little brats who caused the mess in the first place.

"Not," Justin hastened to assure Doris with a tenderly approving glance at her ex-

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panded umbilical region, "that it's all their fault. There's just so damn many of them."

Doris, supine like a pampered queen on the day bed, corrected him gently.

"Us," she said. "Really, Justin—"

"Yes, yes," Justin agreed. "With a name like mine, I ought to be more fair. Us, it is, of course, all ten damn billion of us. And it was really our Great Granddads to blame. If they'd listened to Huxley and the rest of the population-controllers, we'd not be in this box. We mightn't even be, period."

"What a frightening thing to think of!"

"I only meant," Justin pursued, "that since we were all kids, too, once, it does rather keep going back to that. The more kids, the more there are to grow up to beget more kids, ad infinitum till something gives. But with this lousy election coming on, maybe I'm not thinking so straight any more."

"You're a very straight thinker," Doris told him, and she smiled proudly at the Nobel scroll on the wall. "Everybody at N. Y. U. insists you're an absolute genius, one of the last."

Justin tried, and as usual failed, to contain his sarcasm.

"Everybody? You mean all twenty-six morons on the faculty, or that mob of half-literate bums they call a student body?"

"Now you're being difficult," Doris said. But Justin, genius-like had stopped listening. Instead, he was thinking how silly his colleagues would look when he finally announced his answer. It was the obvious the clunkheads never saw; which, when you came down to it, was why clunkheads never won Nobel Prizes.

Nobody denied that in this year of Our Lord, 2060, a new frontier was needed to relieve the horrible overcrowding. So where else, they asked, would you find it except in Outer Space? You couldn't make the world stretch, could you? Of course not. But it was like saying a jar would hold only so many jelly beans. That was true, too, but only in a sense. It was the other sense the clunkheads didn't see.

Doris stirred and murmured. Justin stiffened with concern. Doris said: "It didn't really hurt. It was the surprise. I can't get used to the little monster bumping around inside me. You don't mind me calling it a little monster, do you?"

"Of course not."

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"And it won't be, will it? You promised it wouldn't. Oh, Jus, I simply couldn't stand having an abnormal baby."

"No," he said, sticking to the truth as he saw it. "No, it won't be abnormal."

They had been through this before, ever since the first month when Doris agreed to the hormone injections and the special diet. He said suddenly:

"Did you ever hear of Count Borulwaski? He was a Pole. Handsome, witty, a scholar, and very healthy. He lived to be ninety-eight years old."

"Do you mean my baby will be like him? Oh, I'd love that!"

"I think he will be very much like Borulwaski," Justin said, again quite honestly. And he hoped to God Doris never took it into her pretty blonde head to look up the man in the encyclopedia. It wasn't likely. That was the nice thing about a girl with so few intellectual pretensions.

Justin himself—Dr. Justin Weatherby, biochemist, geneticist, endocrinologist, and politician perforce—got his belly full of intellect every day. Since he could abide neither brains nor absolute idiocy, he was often lonely. But President Austin told people:

"What I like about Weatherby, he's the only confounded scientist I can understand."

To a President of the United States in the hot spot of making unpopular decisions every day and simultaneously seeking reelection, this was important. And it was to have Justin's advice at hand that he had named him consultant to the National Demographic Authority, the agency which —in view of the galloping population crisis—had long since succeeded the Security Council as No. 1 pusher-around of people. Nobody envied Justin this position.

Nobody, either, gave Murray Austin a Chinaman's chance of whipping Senator Wheeler. In sixty years not one American President had won a second term; not one had made good his campaign promise to bring order out of chaos.

To this unavoidable handicap, President Austin had added one of his own: his deliberate by-passing of the powerful Strip City Bosses who had placed him in office.

By habit, Justin glanced at Doris and then at the calendar on his work table with its fatefully-ringed election date of two weeks hence—Tuesday, November 2. A bizarre race, he reflected, between the bal-

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lot and the stork. Mind-reading Doris teased:

"What if I had a miscarriage?"

"My God, don't even think it!"

Doris reached for her manicure set and began to do her nails. She'd really never understood why Justin thought her baby would be more important than anyone else's—except to themselves, of course. But if she were puzzled, and if she wished Justin were less secretive about the experiments that took him so often to his Rockland County laboratory camp, she did not actually worry. She said:

"You're rather fond of the old goat, aren't you?"

"Let us say, rather," said Justin stiffly, "I am fond of my country. Murray Austin is the first President I can remember who is really trying to do something."

"Meaning," smiled Doris, "that the old goat listens to you."

"Exactly. But I wish you would not call him an old goat. He's younger than I, a shade taller, and almost as handsome."

"Gee, we sure hate ourself."

Grinning, Justin stepped to the window, his usual method of closing a conversation. Three panes were cracked and he had patched them with tape. Just outside, the once-private terrace had been converted to a fire escape long ago when the apartments were sub-divided. Somebody had told him that Washington Square Village in the old days was a very nice place to live, with elevators even and private bathrooms. It would be pleasant to have your own bath. Still, they were darn lucky to have this single room to themselves, and that only because of his standing with the Government.

From his high vantage he could see into Washington Square where, under the autumnal nudity of the ancient trees, the students had their digs—old army tents mostly and packing-crate shanties. A snow threat hung in the bleak sky; a light breeze rippled the tent walls and churned the smoke from the community kitchen's licensed fire. Oblivious of the forming weather, a group of ragged students mustered near the ruined Arch. Some carried signs:

"Down with Austin! Vote for Wheeler!

"Venus or Bust!

"Damn the Budget, Try Again!"

In loose, unmilitary forma-

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tion they filed past the Arch, perhaps to picket some visiting delegation; more likely to stage another hot-headed rally of their own Society for the Settlement of Space.

Exasperated at their persistence (and the persistence of all human hope) Justin watched as they lost themselves in the wretched pedestrian hordes of Fifth Avenue. A little uneasily, he wondered how they would take the President's announcement. Or, for that matter, his own.

"Hon, I'm gasping. Roll me one, huh?"

Justin returned to the table and lifted the porcelain top of the room's only antique, a 19th Century apothecary's jar deceptively labeled "Opium." There was but little tobacco left. Careful to spill not a single grain, he rolled a cigarette, inserted it between Doris' lips and held a match. When she'd inhaled, hungrily, she asked:

"Aren't you having one?"

"Joe's not sure when he can get some more," he said thoughtlessly, and at once regretted subtracting from her pleasure.

"I feel like a heel. Have a drag on this."

"No. No, thanks, I'm trying to quit," he lied lamely.

Crazy, this young girl latching onto the habit forty-odd years after they'd switched the last Burley field to essential food grains. Only dimly could he himself remember when the Tobacco Prohibition Amendment was enacted. Could there be something in Doris' metabolism to demand nicotine? The thought startled him; would it make a difference in his calculations?

From behind her pillow Doris pulled out a fat, once-glossy magazine of a type not published for generations. It was dated January, 1959, and Justin had brought it home from the college library to amuse her. Turning to a splashy, full-page cigarette ad, she asked:

"Were they really manufactured a hundred years ago?"

"Oh, yes, they called them tailor-mades." He closed an eye to recall a specific fact. "Americans smoked nearly half a trillion a year. It was a tremendous industry."

Doris said slowly:

"You ought to have something relaxing to do."

"I could get drunk on lab alcohol, but that's illegal, too." He sat down beside her and stroked her neck. "Besides, I have you."

"You're leering! I'll see you after the baby is born."

She turned a page. It was

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hard to tell whether the slim girl stepping from the orchid-colored Cadillac in front of the theatre marquee was advertising the Cartier emerald necklace or the sable coat.

"You never see anything like this," Doris said.

"They're still around. In hiding, mostly. Once in a while, after a riot, and if you want to pay an outrageous price, you can get something like it under the counter."

"But you couldn't wear it!"

"Of course not. You'd be torn to pieces."

"And just anybody could fly to Europe or take cruises? And everyone had cars like this? Not just the Government?"

"Nearly," said Justin. "You could put all the people in all the autos and all the back seats would still be empty."

Doris sighed.

"It must have been a fabulous time to live."

Perhaps it was. Even history-minded Justin found it hard to believe the cold statistics of that storied era: a life expectancy at birth of sixty-eight years; a daily diet of three thousand calories; meat, eggs, milk whenever you wished (why, he himself could scarcely remember the taste of beef!); bountiful super-markets groaning with viands; choice liqueurs and wines; fresh fruit in winter; mountainous surpluses of wheat and corn; candy shops, jewelry shops, flower shops, book shops; opera, theatre, museums; a telephone for every three persons; half the population in steady jobs, another quarter in school . . . and land, land, land for everyone!

Where had this great nation failed?

To the few who still troubled to study the past, there was no mystery. From the twelve billion a year spent during the infant age of Sputniks and Explorers, America had spilled her treasure like sand into the frantic race to conquer Space. Temporarily braked by the Wars, but with each Peace redoubling the effort, the nation in the decade after the Red collapse had poured half her national income into those innumerable stabs toward the stars.

Like the Mississippi Bubble, the madness mounted. With the first building of the Moon stations, with a lucky landing on Mars, hope in the great gamble rekindled and the world "ahh'd" like children watching fireworks.

No cost was counted. For,

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as the 20th Century turned into the 21st, the exploding population seemed to make success ever more urgent. Demagogues were swept into office on the mere promise of more Space spending. Their failure but paved the way for successor demagogues with still wilder plans.

Yet each new surge of the wasteful effort saw the economy erode, the dollar shrink, and private income shrivel and disappear. Markets for first the luxuries and then the staples contracted and vanished. Non-Space industries closed and scores of millions were thrown on the dole.

The simplest law of economics had asserted itself: the frantic expenditure of capital without return could only end in complete bankruptcy.

Corporate giants stopped their dividends and defaulted their bonds, trading ceased on the stock exchanges, insurance empires collapsed, banks failed and all the gold in Fort Knox could not make good on the insured deposits.

Newspapers folded for lack of advertising; television blacked out, and Government radio remained the sole means of mass communication.

Taxes soared—and went unpaid. Schools closed, colleges foundered. Skills, acquired in a thousand years of Western civilization, were lost to posterity. And the great medical discoveries of the 19th and 20th Centuries, so important a factor in the mushrooming population, were all but forgotten by the ever-diminishing ranks of doctors.

Diseases, once thought banished forever, reappeared. Ignorance spread. Tensions gripped the nation. The hospitals, prisons and madhouses spilled over, and each night brought new terror from marauding gangs. Life became a nightmare.

By 2030 the last foundations for any industrial nation collapsed as increasing man—cancer on his own planet, spendthrift and wastrel—exhausted his oil and coal and gas and minerals. By that year the subways had stopped in New York; trains braked to a halt from Coast to Coast; great liners rusted at their docks; planes grounded, and the lights went out in street and home.

Nor did power from atom or wind or sun or tide begin to fill the breach. Research, so long channeled into the single paramount objective of celestial pyrotechnics, had neglected to find replacement fuels.

This was the chaotic age

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in which Justin Weatherby reached manhood and Doris was born.

Charlie Hackett paid one of his rare calls next morning, flushed from climbing the seven backstairs flights. He was Doris' uncle, a former Mayor of New York and still the undisputed political boss with sixty million votes in his pocket if you counted the Upstate graveyards. He was past middle age, plumper than the austere times permitted, and it took him a moment to sit and recover his breath.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, blinking. "It's good to get out of that mob, and the smallpox out of hand again. Why d'you know, when I was Mayor twenty years ago, this town had only twenty-eight million people. It must be twice that now."

Justin, wondering what prompted the visit, said:

"And it was built for only eight."

"Really? Hmm. You ever been to India?"

"Oh, yes."

"Worse'n here?"

"Much worse," said Justin. "Though I judge we're about where they were eighty or ninety years ago."

"I was in London last week, gov'ment trip. This Hindu diplomat was blamin' us for their troubles."

Justin guessed what was coming and smiled. Hackett went on:

"He said we went over there a century or so ago with our bloody doctors and our bloody anti-biotics and our bloody surplus food and cured their diseases and filled their tummies. We cut down their death rate and now, where they'd had at least a place to lie down, there's hardly room to stand. He claimed it wasn't moral."

"I suppose," murmured Justin, "we should have let them keep on dying like flies."

"That's what I told him, but he said we coulda educated 'em first and maybe they'da turned to family planning."

Justin was grinning.

"Education on an empty stomach? Like which comes first, the chick or the egg? Rats! Education wasn't the answer. We had more schools than anywhere, but it happened here. We had two hundred million people back in 1975 and today we've got a billion. Which just proves that old Tom Malthus was right: the population outruns the food supply every time if you don't keep it down with war, famine, disease or sexual discipline."

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"And I guess," grunted Hackett, "we can't put a cop in every bedroom." He colored. "Sorry, Doris."

"It's perfectly all right," Doris said. "It might be a very good idea."

Her uncle slapped his knee with delight and Justin chuckled.

"Y'know," said Hackett, "there's people in Europe still think we shoulda used our nuclear bombs those last two wars. Maybe they're right, it woulda cut down the population."

"No," said Justin, "but say we had. There were four billion in the world in 1980. How many could the bombs kill before knocking both sides out? A billion? All Europe, Russia and North America? So you'd put the clock back only twenty years to 1960 when there were only three billion, and delayed the crisis by only that much. But you'd still have it. No, it was better not and we hadn't the blood on our hands."

He winked.

"Besides, it saved our nuclear power for the Great Adventure."

Hackett missed the malicious irony.

"But you can't tell 'em that. They blame us for everything. They're poor. God, they're poor. And because we're a mite better off, and by some miracle still have free elections, they hate our guts."

"They always did," said Justin. "The legend of Uncle Shylock dies hard."

"They hate us," Hackett repeated. "And yet, it's just pitiful the way they look to us for the answer."

And now Justin suspected why Hackett had called.

"Space?"

"Space," affirmed Hackett. "They're waitin', like we all are, for the time we can start movin' people upstairs."

Justin said nothing, and Hackett stared out the window. Then, a bit too casually:

"I hear Austin's goin' before Congress with some fool announcement?"

Justin thought: Damn Austin! If ever he needed grass roots support which only the Bosses could give, it was now. Yet the idiot had failed even to consult the most powerful man in the East!

"Yes," Justin said, "and after that, I'm to make an announcement, too."

Hackett asked with blunt anger:

"You tellin'? Or is it too top-drawer for the likes of me?"

"No, no. Listen! He should have told you. I don't blame

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you for being sore, or McPhail or Harvey and the rest of your bunch. But this is once you've got to forgive him. You know the strain he's been under and it's too important for the country—"

He glanced at Doris, not wishing to shock her, wondering how much she had guessed.

"He's going to announce," Justin said slowly, "that the Space Program has failed."

For an utterly disbelieving moment, Boss Hackett sat very still. Only his hands moved, to clench and unclench.

"The blasted fool!"

Justin waited.

"And I'm supposed to forgive that? Why, he'll lose the election for sure now—not that he had much chance!"

Justin said quietly:

"Isn't it about time we quit kidding ourselves?"

Hackett glared.

"My God, man! To destroy in a single stroke everything we've looked forward to for Heaven knows how many years! It's our only hope!"

Justin shook his head.

"Not our only hope." Again he glanced at Doris, disliking to leave her alone now that it might happen at any hour. Still, there were the women next door. He said: "If you could spare a few hours, I want you to see what I've done up at my lab at Camp Jukes."

As the charcoal-burning Government car inched on through the miserable, sluggish throngs of mid-Manhattan, Justin closed his eyes. It was all there, every evil man had prophesied for multiplying man: the skin lesions of pellagra, the deformities left by infantile rickets, the starvation of face and body and mind. Silent expressionless sheep, they moved slowly out of the way; and only a few of the more alert turned to curse or spit.

At 42nd and Fifth, long lines queued patiently up worn stone steps to secure their meager daily rations in what had once been the great Public Library.

The driver was new, and new to New York.

"Jeez! Where do they live, sir?"

Justin nodded toward the soaring skyscrapers, weather-blackened monuments to a commercial past.

"As far up," he said wearily, "as they care to climb."

Hackett emerged from his moody silence.

"Where you from, boy?"

"Iowa, sir."

"It's better out there?"

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"Well, sir, really not. They're hungry, too. But there does seem a bit more room."

"Like for some of our people?"

"I didn't mean that, sir. They're moving folks out in fact. That's why I'm here. Grandpa had this farm, but they took it. They took 'em all and threw 'em together with automation. For better production, they claimed. Nobody's allowed back but the damned button-pushers." He spoke bitterly. "They said the rest of us would get in the way of the machines."

"In the towns where do they live?"

"Well, the empty factories mostly. Like here, they're all closed down, you know, except the ones on the Space Program."

He did not speak again until they had crossed the sagging, rust-coated George Washington Bridge. Looming out of a great signboard high on the Palisades a space-helmeted Uncle Sam pointed an imperative finger at their approach:

"For the American Dream, Buy Space Bonds!"

There was eager conviction in the lad's voice:

"Gosh, when will we make it, sir?"

Even Boss Hackett, viewing Camp Jukes in its isolated fold of the Rockland County Ramapos, marveled at the political strings Justin must have pulled to create it. Its spacious gardens studded with miniature rustic cabins stood like a last remnant of heaven in a world gone to hell. But as they watched from a rise of ground the group's calisthenics on the playing field below, Hackett burst out:

"Dammit, man! You bring me clear up here to see a couple dozen children?"

"You'd better look again," Justin said quietly. "They are not children."

Hackett glared—and gasped.

"But I can well remember when they were," Justin went on. "When I took them from various welfare bureaus, their average age was eighteen months. The girls' average height was thirty-one inches, the boys a trifle more. Well, that's still their height, but they are now twenty years old. Their bodies are of perfect proportion, and their health and I.Q. are far above the national average.

"Are you trying to tell me—" Hackett began in horror.

"No, let me finish. Really,

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there isn't much new. The old Romans practiced a crude form of artificial dwarfing, but for their own sadistic amusement. And we've always had natural midgets and some very famous ones. Philetas, the tutor of Ptolemy; Richard Gibson, the painter, Count Borulwaski of Poland. They were all tiny, extremely intelligent, and lived good long lives.

"What the early endocrinologists found was that a deficiency of growth hormone in the anterior lobe of the pituitary gland caused the condition. They corrected it by injecting the right pituitary extracts so the midgets grew normally.

"Charlie, what I've done is merely reverse the process by a proper manipulation of glandular balance. It's nothing they couldn't have done a century ago. And there's your result: a new and better breed of human in which nothing is omitted but size."

Hackett sat heavily down on a rock and stared at the group.

"Good Lord, man, why did you do it?"

Justin replied with another question.

"Honestly now, Charlie, how long since we first suspected the Space Program would fail?"

"I don't know, twenty years maybe."

"Yes, which was when I began work on the problem. The goal, of course, was to regain our high standard of living. And we thought there were only two answers: move half the population off the planet, or—kill 'em. Those were the only alternatives.

"But here I've come up with a third way: reduction in size. Can't you see what it means? As workers, these little people can produce as much as normal adults. Yet they need only half the food and yardage in clothes, smaller houses, smaller everything. Thing of the tremendous savings in natural resources!"

He paused.

"I know you are terribly shocked," he resumed earnestly. "I was startled myself when the idea occurred. We've always thought progress meant bigness. The ideal man was six feet tall and all that. But it's bunk. Even when our standard of living was at record high, that ideal was still the exception. And since our time of trouble began, the average height has actually decreased by three inches."

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Hackett was shaking his head.

"But dammit, you can't make 'em small all at once."

"No, it's a long haul and it will take all kinds of courage for Congress to pass the laws. But if we don't start now, soon it will be too late. Here is my plan:

"Some of us think the malnutrition and spreading disease are starting to stabilize the population at about one billion, which is still 'way too high. About fourteen million die each year; at present some fifteen million babies survive birth.

"I can't work it on children over two years old. By then they're too tall. But if we stop the growth, right now, of the thirty million in that age group, allowing for naturally mortality in twenty years we'll have over two hundred million small people —a fifth of our number. At least it will give us some elbow room to attack our miserable standard of living."

Still Hackett protested:

"It would be rough. Nobody wants to be peewees."

"I know, and there's another problem. At about age twenty, they'll be having their own kids. And midgets don't give birth to midgets. So we'd have to keep on with artificial dwarfing in perpetuity, except—"

Justin had reached the most delicate point.

"Well, I tackled it from another angle. What science has known for years is that it's the condition of the child in the womb during the first three months of pregnancy that regulates size. I developed a simple injection and diet, and I think the baby Doris delivers will be the answer."

Hackett sprang to his feet.

"You practiced on my niece? You cold-blooded louse!"

Justin held out a pleading hand.

"Please. I said it would take courage, more guts than the human race has ever known. But if my procedure succeeds with Doris, we'd adopt it as part of the normal pre-natal care for all prospective mothers. And in two generations anyone over three feet tall would be the exception."

Hackett was sneering.

"Has it occurred to the Great Nobel Mind that when we have finally be-littled ourselves, the foreign giants will move in and knock us off?"

"Yes, and it's also occurred to Austin. The obvious answer is that sheer size

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hasn't counted since the invention of firearms. My guess is when they see our returning health and prosperity, they'll be only too glad to join us."

Hackett gazed down toward the field. The girls, apple-cheeked and hair in disarray, had teamed against the muscular boys in a softball game. It had been a long time since he had seen such spirit and laughter. Heavily he asked:

"What d'ya want from me?"

Justin chose his words carefully:

"When Austin admits the Space failure, there will be a great wave of despondency. Then, when all hope seems lost, I am to go before Congress with this—new hope. Now I'd be damned naive to think Austin's strong enough to push it through by himself. But Congress would do it for you, and McPhail in Chicago and Harvey out on the Coast, and the rest of your crowd."

Mentally he ticked them off: Blake in Atlanta and Lipsky up in Alaska and Cabot in Boston . . . the all-powerful clique of Strip City Bosses who actually ran the country.

"Of course," he pressed, "you'd have to reelect Austin as the only man who has the nerve to see the thing through."

Hackett grunted.

"That's just the trouble," he said.

Darkness had fallen when they started back. There was still no telling what Hackett was thinking. He sat stonily alone in the rear seat, a man in deep thought.

A bit before six, Justin switched on the radio. For a few moments an uninspired concert filled the car. Then:

"We again interrupt to repeat an important warning. Attention all personnel using Government vehicles! If you are in normal riot zones, abandon cars at once and proceed on foot. We repeat—"

Hackett stirred.

"Blast it, now what's up?"

Already the driver was slowing down. Hackett pressed his nose to the window.

"We're in Fort Lee. We're okay here, but we sure can't make it across the bridge. Dammit, we'll have to walk into town, but first let's hear the news."

Tires crunched on gravel as the car, lights dimmed, swung into a by-street and stopped in the shadow of a high wall.

"And now for our news report!

"Riots, the worst in thirty

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years, swept the nation late today in the wake of President Austin's stunning message to Congress. The Federal Building in St. Louis is burning. In the San Francisco Embarcadero thousands of rock-throwing hoodlums are fighting Federal troops. In Manhattan, mobs raided food depots.

"From Japan and India comes word that the President's message touched off a new wave of suicides . . .

"The message was brief and, in the view of his party's leaders, courageous. He told Congress he has ordered abandonment of the Moon stations. He also has ordered immediate dismantlement of all rocket-launching installations, the closing of rocket-building yards, and the complete cessation of all Space research. He has turned back to the General Treasury the last nineteen billion dollars earmarked for the Space Program. We give you this recording—"

President Austin's voice came on, precise, cool:

"My decision, believe me, was most difficult. The destruction of a long-cherished dream can never be easy. But within recent years, it has become increasingly clear to our leading scientists that man can never reach the stars.

"For better or worse, the ten billion of us humans who had hoped to find a solution for our population problems in Outer Space must remain chained to this old and tired planet.

"I say, it is old and tired. But let us remember, too, that for six thousand years of recorded history this Earth of ours has made a pretty good home. With Thomas Jefferson, I believe that our world belongs to the living and not to the dead. I do not, I will not, give up hope.

"Thank you and God bless you."

For a moment the silence in the car was insufferable. Then Hackett said gruffly:

"We'd best get out now."

Justin heard Doris' tortured sobbing long before he reached the top flight. Trying to hurry, his legs buckled. The long tramp across George Washington Bridge, the nine miles down the west face of Manhattan; the skirting of hysterical, shouting mobs; the senseless crushing to death of women under their feet . . . no wonder he was exhausted.

And there was Austin's speech. At Times Square, the mob had hanged him in effigy

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and wrecked his campaign headquarters. It was there, in the red glare of a burning building, that Hackett reached his decision.

"Okay," he'd said. "I'm still sore as hell with Austin, but we'll go along. I'll call McPhail and the boys tomorrow. This is only providing, of course, that Doris turns out all right."

Justin reached his landing and swung into the corridor. Ahead, a door opened and the midwife flitted out.

Doris was shrieking now. It tore at his heart. As he reached his door, the shrieking stopped. Doris whimpered:

"It's a dwarf, I tell you! Oh Justin, how could you?"

Justin nodded at the midwife. Her answering nod was assuring.

"Rotten I'm late." He crossed to his table. From a drawer he procured a bottle, poured green fluid into a glass, stepped to the bed, held it to Doris' lips. Her eyes were wide and frightened.

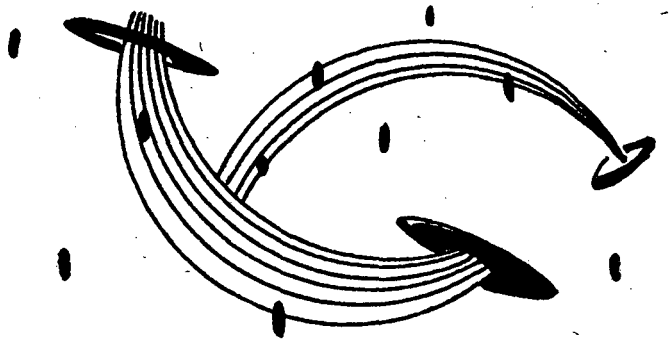
"Drink," ordered Justin. "Drink, damn it, I love you."

Only when the sedative calmed her did he step to the basket and peer in. Slowly, and with pride and great tenderness, he smiled.

"He's perfect."

"But so tiny," whispered the midwife in awe. "It can't weigh a pound. Can it live?" Justin was grinning.

"It's a new creation," he said. **THE END**



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VENUSIAN, GET OUT!

By ROG PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATOR DUNCANSON

You and I are civilized, enlightened, sensible. We love everyone and are above discrimination. Or so we truly believe. But if a web-footed Venusian moved in next door, could we accept him as a brother—as an equal? And then again, how would the Venusian treat us?

SCREWY-LOOKING creatures, those damned Venusians. Neither animal nor reptile but something in between, with hair branched like feathers. And blue skin. All right in their place, but as neighbors? Uh uh! Anyway, everything was going to be all right now. That injunction would stick. It had better stick!

Charlie chuckled and lazily stretched out more comfortably, resting his legs on that coffee table Mr. Ki had given him—the poor sucker. He chuckled again at the memory of what had happened.

That Venusian family, the Kis, had driven up next door in a brand-new 1992 Emperor Sedan with a moving van load of furniture right behind them. They had had to turn right around and go away again, too, when the waiting sheriff served the injunction! But before they left, Mr. Ki had climbed into the load and brought out this coffee table and given it to him as a present. Ki had been pathetically insistent that he accept it.

What Mr. Ki didn't know was that Charlie was behind the injunction himself. It had been the doings of the property owners' association, but Charlie had rammed it through the business meeting and it wouldn't have gone through if he hadn't. The other owners were wishy washy.

But not him. He and Madge had taken a drive on Sunday and had gone over to that section the other side of town where a few Venusian fami-

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The gesture was universal. It meant OUT in any language.

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lies had already gotten in, and that had been The End, so far as he was concerned. Why, they kept their back yards flooded and muddy all the time, and grew the damndest stuff. It had bright yellow leaves and smelled like the tide flats that time he and Madge had taken a vacation trip to the west coast. People said you could get used to it, but Lord what a stink. He didn't want anything like that next door!

What did they want to let Venusians live on Earth for anyway? Some crazy business about exchange privileges, but let them stay back where they belong. It wasn't right, having to pay taxes and then skimp to meet the payments on last year's 1991 Ford while the Venusian immigrant got a brand-new car paid for with *your* taxes.

That had been really great, though, them driving up with the moving van right behind them, and the sheriff waiting there, and handing them the injunction against moving in next door.

Charlie had been watering the lawn out front so he could take in the whole thing, and he hadn't missed any of it. And he had played the "kind neighbor" role, veddy soddy about the "unhappy turn of events."

That beanpole Venusian, Ki, had been taken in by it, too, and very touched by Charlie's friendliness. He had insisted on dragging out that coffee table and making him a present of it.

Madge had been outraged at his accepting it when he brought it into the house. "Adding insult to injury!" she had ranted at him. But she had reluctantly admitted it was just right in front of the davenport, and anyway the Kis had already driven off in their new car with the moving van trailing along, so she couldn't make him give it back.

It was made out of Venusian hardwood of some kind, and that intricate scrollwork carving on it was undoubtedly done by hand.

Charlie studied it admiringly. It was the prettiest coffee table he had ever seen in his life. That scrollwork had something about it almost three dimensional. *Really* three dimensional. Those lines in the scrollwork seemed to curve this way and that, go over and under—

He couldn't take his eyes off the particular line they were following. It seemed to expand, come closer, get bigger,

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until it went under instead of over; he could *almost* go under with it. Almost. *Maybe, if he tried a little harder, he could. . . .*

Alarm had nagged at him.

He wondered what had caused the anxiety, then remembered the car he had just passed. Damned crazy drivers. There was another one coming, now. Good thing nothing was wrong with his brakes. What had made him think there was in the first place? He couldn't remember. This annoyed him.

All that bother and fuss he had gone to, just because he had been so sure something was wrong with the brakes. The worst part of it had been that extra eight-block walk from the garage to the office.

Mac, the garage man, had said, "We couldn't find anything wrong, so we took off all four wheels and looked inside the drums. Everything sound as a dollar. We thought you'd want to be sure."

The thought entered Charlie's mind that maybe he *wanted* the brakes to go bad with Madge alone in the car. But that was absurd. Why would he want Madge to get killed?

He didn't, of course.

In the driveway in front of the garage at home, coasting about ten miles an hour, he slammed on the brakes as hard as he could. The car stopped dead, almost making him bang his head against the windshield.

Why this sudden obsession with the car brakes? He slammed the car door in annoyance at himself. There was nothing wrong with the brakes.

He pushed open the kitchen door and went into the house. His annoyance transferred itself to his wife. Madge wasn't in the kitchen getting dinner like she was supposed to.

"Madge!" he called, crossing the kitchen to the door to the living room.

She was asleep on the davenport. He went over and shook her shoulder gently. "Wake up, Madge," he said. "I'm home. Had a hard day at the office."

She opened her eyes suddenly, and looked up at him.

"Wake up," he said mildly.

"I'm awake," she snapped. "What are you doing home early?"

"I'm not early," Charlie said. "In fact, I'm about twenty minutes late. I had to walk to the garage to pick up the car. I left it this morning to get the brakes looked at."

"Well, don't snap at me!" Madge snapped. "Can I help it

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if you're so late coming home that I fall asleep waiting for you?"

He opened his mouth to protest at her illogic, then decided against it. Why argue? Especially since she was going to the kitchen now.

It was hard to figure the moods of a woman. Feeling sorry for himself, Charlie got the evening paper from the front porch and sat down on the davenport, stretching out with a sigh, his legs on the coffee table.

He didn't bother to open the paper. It rested unnoticed on his lap. He looked at the coffee table, and wondered what Mr. Ki and his two wives and four kids were going to do.

Maybe they would find some other place and not fight the injunction. Hell, Charlie thought, if the neighbors did not want *me* to move in a place, I wouldn't shove in where I wasn't welcome. Of course, the hearing in court was coming up in three more days. The best thing for Mr. Ki was simply not to show up.

Charlie grinned slyly. He had talked to Joe Dinwiddie on the phone this afternoon about it. They were all set to go. If Mr. Ki showed up to contest the injunction, Charlie would be all nice and sweet to him. That was all fixed, so Ki would think that it was all the doings of the other members of the group and not him. He would make a mild plea for "fairness," but be damned sure he didn't make it too strong.

The trouble with Madge was that she was getting too lazy. Imagine! Asleep! Probably right now she was opening a couple of cans of stuff instead of cooking a real supper. He was getting fed up with things like that. And always whining.

If she were to kick the bucket it would be small loss. He could marry someone that had what it takes. That was the trouble with marrying when you're twenty-three. You married a girl a couple of years younger, like Madge, and by the time you're forty she's thirty-eight and all washed up. Whining all the time, and when you came home hungry because you were concerned about making the car absolutely safe you found her on the davenport snoring.

Well, there were ways to fix that. In spite of the detective books there were perfect murders every day. It wasn't too tough to commit the perfect murder.

Just offhand he could think

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of one way that was perfect. Come to think of it, having the brakes checked would fit right in. He knew a little about brakes.

One thing, he had been good at imitating voices ever since he was a kid, and he could imitate Madge's dad perfectly. All right. The thing was to fix the brakes so they would go out suddenly. That would be easy, with nothing to prove later that they had been monkeyed with. Wrap cloth around a section of the tubing to one of the brakes and use pliers to bend it back and forth until it was ready to break open. Then call Madge and imitate her dad's voice and tell her her mother was very ill and not expected to live more than another hour. She would be in a panic.

Madge would run out and get in the car and drive hell bent for an election the whole hundred and thirty miles to Freeport to see her mother before she kicked off. And every few blocks she would have to slam on the brakes. About halfway there the line would break open and spill out the brake fluid, and there would be no brakes. That would be the end of Madge—with a little luck.

"Dinner's ready, Charlie," Madge said from the kitchen doorway.

"Okay," Charlie said casually, getting up.

"Canned beef stew!" he said disgustedly.

Madge shrugged.

Charlie made a grim resolution to go out to the garage after dinner and fix the brake line, and put his plan into operation tomorrow.

He picked up his fork and pushed it into the watery mess that was mostly potatoes with only a trace of beef—as though beef were something incredibly priceless—and looked at what he scooped up. Potatoes. Oh, there was a couple of strings of beef dirtying the side of one of the chunks of potato. Suddenly he wasn't hungry.

"I'm not hungry," he growled, shoving back from the table and getting up in a fit of disgust.

He went to the back door and took his hat and coat off the hook.

"Where are you going?" Madge asked.

"Out," he said tonelessly, turning away from her stricken expression.

As he backed out of the garage he saw her face at the window. What he had ever seen in her he couldn't understand. Well, by this time to-

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morrow he would be free of her for good.

He drove fast, heading toward the city limits and open country where he could pull off somewhere, and work unobserved. It would soon be dark and it would be better to get it done while there was still light to see by.

He finally parked in a picnic spot on the river road. It was far enough off the road so that no passersby could see what he was doing.

Crawling under the car with a pair of pliers and a rag, he went to work on the left rear brake line. After ten minutes of strenuous work he began to realize that the copper tubing wasn't going to weaken from the little bending he could do.

Another plan came to him. There was a pointed tool something like an ice pick in the tool box. He drove the point into the tubing until he estimated that the hole it made would be a snug fit for a nail, driving it from an upward angle so that the nail wouldn't fall out.

When he pushed the nail into the hole it fitted snugly and the trickle of brake fluid stopped.

That would be good enough. One solid push on the brakes and the pressure would push the nail out and drain the fluid. With no fluid there would be no brakes.

He drove back home slowly, using only the hand brake. After parking the car in the garage he looked to make sure the nail was still in place.

Madge was in the living room watching TV when he went in. He looked at her without saying anything and went back into the kitchen. He was hungry now. He looked in the refrigerator for the stew. It wasn't there. He found it dumped in the garbage can and settled for a sandwich thick with slices of ham and cheese.

With something in his stomach he began to relax.

It was a cinch, now. He knew how Madge drove. She zoomed up to a stoplight and slammed on the brakes, inches from cross traffic. All the time. If she were in a real hurry she would be even worse. There wasn't a chance she wouldn't be killed.

He awoke a couple of minutes before the alarm went off in the morning, rolled over—and Madge was already awake, smiling at him.

He smiled back and reached for the cigarettes on the night stand. They smoked without talking, bare shoul-

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ders touching in an intimate, comfortable way.

Sometimes, Charlie was thinking, this minute or two is the best part of the day.

He had completely forgotten about the brakes on the car, and as he shut off the alarm and got out of bed he was already in the automatic, habitual groove that would carry him through shower, shaving, dressing, breakfast, and driving to work.

The sun shone brightly through the bathroom window. It was going to be a perfect day. Maybe if things went smoothly at the office he could drive out to the country club after lunch and get in a few holes of golf.

Back in the bedroom again, he could hear the soft snoring of the percolator in the kitchen. He finished dressing. Tingling in every cell with awakened energy and life, he strode cheerfully into the kitchen.

Madge, having heard him coming, was already pouring his coffee.

"Good morning, darling," he said happily as he sat down and began putting cream and sugar into his coffee.

"Better hurry," Madge said as she always did.

"Uh huh," Charlie said unconsciously, giving his coffee a final stir and picking up the cup.

He brought the cup to his lips. And it was then that he remembered.

He set the cup down quickly, coffee spilling into the saucer and over its edge onto the table. Madge, hearing the loud clatter of the cup, turned quickly from the stove. She saw the sheen of perspiration on his forehead.

"What is it, darling?" she asked, a tightness in her voice.

"Nothing," Charlie said. But it was something. *What if he hadn't remembered at all?* He would have gone out to the car and started to work as usual. Then—

He pushed back from the table and stood up, solemnly resolving never to commit another murder as long as he lived. It was too hard on his nerves — and no job for an absentminded man like him. That was certain.

"I'm not taking the car today, Madge," he said. "I won't have time for breakfast. Sorry. I just remembered." He went to her and planted a peck approximately on her lips, grabbed his hat, and dashed out.

The whole thing, from when he remembered until he went out the door, hadn't taken more than fifteen sec-

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onds. He worried briefly about Madge suspecting.

At the corner he caught the bus. Actually, the bus was almost as quick as driving. And this morning it was better. It gave him twenty minutes to relax and get into the mood of imitating Madge's father over the phone.

Imitating someone's voice was a lot more than just changing your voice. It was slipping into the pattern of the person's personality, of thinking the same way, saying things the way that person would.

He thought carefully of what he was going to say. He would say, "Madge, mama had a stroke while fixin' breakfast. I'm at the hospital." (That would keep Madge from calling home to verify it.) "I think she's dyin'." That would make Madge forget everything but getting there as fast as she could.

Charlie rehearsed it several times in his mind. When he got off the bus and went into the office building he started for the bank of telephone booths, hesitated, then decided to wait until after the morning rush. In the morning congestion she might not have a chance to get up any real speed before needing her brakes.

Upstairs he nodded to the blonde receptionist as he crossed the plush waiting room and went down the narrow corridor to the door to his own office.

For the next hour he busied himself with routine work. Then it was a little after nine-thirty. The worst of the morning traffic would be off the streets. And he hadn't had any breakfast, either.

He went downstairs to the coffee shop off the lobby and had toast and coffee and kidded with two of the office girls who were taking their morning break early.

Afterwards he went to the telephone booths, and, taking a deep breath to steel himself, slipped into one and carefully closed the door.

Two minutes later he was out. It had gone perfectly. Madge had swallowed it without a shadow of a question.

Upstairs the receptionist said, "Oh, Charlie, your wife just called. She said she would try to call you later on."

"See if you can get her," Charlie said.

He stood by her desk while she dialed. She was a nice little number. Maybe he would make a play for her later on, after the funeral. He heard the faint buzzing from the

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phone. She looked up, smiling into his eyes. He smiled back, then put on a slightly worried expression. "What did she say?" he asked.

"Just that she had to rush and would try to call you later. And if she wasn't home when you got there, the stuff for dinner would be on the stove."

"Okay." Charlie turned away.

In his office he started to work, but he couldn't concentrate. Somewhere in the city Madge was speeding along with brakes that would be no good any minute now. Maybe already it had happened.

Why had he done it?

The question kept repeating itself in his mind. Why had he killed Madge? It was senseless. He loved his wife. Not very passionately. They had been married too long for that. But he had been satisfied. There was no one else, either.

Yet suddenly, for no reason, it had seemed the most logical thing in the world to plan to kill her. Why? It didn't make sense. He looked back on it now with a feeling of unreality.

The phone rang. He picked it up and said hello into it. It was the boss asking him if the Stevens account was ready yet. He said no, he was still working on it. When he hung up he noticed the brightness of his moist handprint on the plastic. Sweat, and the office was air-conditioned.

Why had he done it?

He felt sick inside. It had to be a mental illness. It couldn't be anything else. What else could it be?

A spell? Black magic? Ha ha. Purple magic. Venusians. But things like that were a lot of nonsense. It was a mental aberration, pure and simple. Maybe caused by a brain tumor pressing on his brain.

He would have to get an examination, maybe an operation.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. Imagine, a brain tumor pressing on your brain. No pain, nothing. Out of a clear sky you start planning your wife's murder—all because you have a brain tumor.

Sure, there were stories about secret rites of the Venusians, things science didn't know about. But Mr. Ki didn't even know he was behind that injunction to keep the Kis from moving in next door. Ki had even given him that coffee table as a friendly gesture.

The phone rang again.

"Mr. Charles Carter?" a crisp female voice asked.

"Yes?"

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"This is the emergency hospital. Your wife was just brought in. A traffic accident."

"Is she hurt?"

"Would you please come to the hospital at once?"

"Is she alive?" Charlie demanded.

"Yes."

"Oh, thank God!" Charlie breathed. "I'll be right over."

"It's going to be all right!" he breathed happily as he ran out of his office.

"She's in bad shape," the quiet man who introduced himself as Dr. Smith said. "She crushed her chest against the steering wheel. The ambulance attendant had to attach a head circulatory and we rushed her into the operating room and sewed up the aorta. It had been punctured by a splintered rib. I think we'll save her all right, but it was close. There was no brain damage."

"When can I see her?" Charlie asked.

"Not until tomorrow. She's still under head circulatory. We'll remove it in a few hours —as soon as our tests show that her body is responding properly. There was some blood coagulation in her liver, but that was to be expected, with no circulation at all for almost twenty minutes. We have a filter by-pass to keep the clots from lodging in her lungs any more than necessary, and we have her chest spread open so we can keep watch."

Dr. Smith patted Charlie on the shoulder. "Everything will be all right," he said. "We got to her in time. She hadn't been dead five minutes."

Charlie shuddered and sat down, his knees suddenly weak. A nurse came into the doctor's office with a cup of coffee.

"Drink this," Dr. Smith said. "It will fix you up."

"Coffee will fix me up?" Charlie said.

"This coffee will," Dr. Smith said.

Charlie gulped it down. A minute later he grinned at the doctor and the nurse.

The doctor grinned back and said, "It's a standard brew for the relatives of emergency patients now. It will keep you cheerful and optimistic for twenty-four hours, and it won't impair your thinking a bit."

"Where can I get more?" Charlie said. "I like the way I'm feeling."

"You can't," Dr. Smith chuckled. "I'd suggest you go home and stay there. Oh, by the way, the police want you to contact the accident divi-

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sion. They'll tell you where your car has been taken."

The car. Would they be able to tell that the brake line had been tampered with? "Thank you, Doctor," Charlie said.

He took a taxi home. He let himself in through the front door, something he hadn't done in months. The house seemed very vacant. The drapes over the picture windows were drawn, as though Madge had expected to be away for days.

What would happen when she recovered and found out her mother hadn't had a stroke, and her father hadn't called her? She would know then that it had been him who called her.

He grinned cheerfully. Oh, well, nothing mattered except that Madge was alive. That was all that mattered. The rest would work out.

He should have asked Dr. Smith about being examined for a brain tumor. It had slipped his mind.

He turned away from the windows—and there was the coffee table Mr. Ki had given him. He looked at it, startled. It gave him a strange feeling. Into his mind crept a strong wish for Madge to die. Maybe the nurse would slip up when she pulled the tubes from the head circulatory out of the arteries and veins in Madge's neck. Maybe . . .

But the thoughts slipped away, leaving only a cushion of cheerful optimism.

But why had those thoughts come? Was there something about this coffee table that produced such thoughts?

Nonsense!

He crossed the room to the kitchen, shoving the absurd thought from his mind.

The kitchen was bright and cheerful. The wall clock with its blue numerals pointed to one-thirty. There was a note laying on the stove.

Humming very contentedly, Charlie picked it up and read it. "Charlie," it read, "if I'm not back, there's potato salad in the refrigerator and some steak in the broiler all ready to turn on. I'll call you as soon as I can. Love, Madge."

Bursting into song, Charlie pulled out the broiler and saw that the steak was okay, so he turned on the flame.

He went to the refrigerator and brought out the dish of potato salad. It was the kind he liked best, the kind only Madge could make.

That damned coffee table! What did he want the thing for, anyway? He would get rid of it right now.

He went into the living

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room and got it, and took it out into the back yard. Out next to the alley was a small pile of dried weeds and lumber scraps he had been intending to burn anyway.

He laid the coffee table on top and set fire to the dried weeds. The fire burned brightly, and when it reached up around the coffee table it licked at it hungrily, then began to eat into it.

Charlie returned to the kitchen. The steak was a little too done on the top side. He turned it over, and put a flame under what was left of the breakfast coffee.

Ten minutes later he put the sizzling steak on the plate beside a generous scoop of potato salad, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down at the table.

Good old Madge. She was a wonderful wife. A quiet sense of humor, never complaining—Well, not as much as the average wife he knew. Good salad. He smacked his lips over it while he put cream and sugar into his coffee and stirred it.

It was a little scummy on top. Maybe he should have made a fresh pot, instead of using warmed-over breakfast coffee.

He shrugged cheerfully. Why bother?

He sipped it. Bitter as the devil. He made a wry face and took a big swallow. In his stomach it exploded into agony.

Then his eyes grew round with surprised realization.

"So it *was* the coffee table!" he tried to say, but his voice came out only a painful croak. He knew he was dying.

"So this is death," he thought, and though the thought should have filled him with terror he felt only a mild bitterness and an underlying amusement tinged with sad regret.

"Why is that?" he thought. How could drugs the doctor had put in his coffee to keep him cheerful work on him after he was dead?

Maybe it wasn't the drugs. It was really amusing, sitting with his legs propped on that devilish coffee table plotting Madge's murder and never suspecting it was having the same effect on her.

She must have poisoned the coffee so he would drink it for breakfast! No wonder she had looked so strange when he choked on it and got up from the table and rushed out of the house.

That devil from Venus, Mr. Ki. He hadn't been fooled at all. He had known who was

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behind the injunction to keep him from moving into the house next door, and he had it all planned. The perfect murder to get rid of whoever stands in your way. Be nice to them, give them a coffee table with some kind of hypnotic carvings on it that work on the mind.

A strong regret swept over Charlie. Ki and his family had been very likeable in spite of their alienness. It wouldn't have been so bad having them as neighbors. It was just the idea of it, was all.

Why wasn't he hating Mr. Ki instead of thinking of him as a nice guy? It must be the dope Dr. Smith put in the coffee. You couldn't be mad at anyone and in a cheerful, optimistic frame of mind at the same time.

But the dope couldn't be affecting him now, so maybe Ki was a nice guy.

"If I had my life to live over," Charlie thought, "I would let the Ki family move in next door."

But they would get to move in now anyway, with him dead. Still, if he had his life to live over he would let Ki move in next door.

Murder was a funny thing. Maybe it was what the docs call a psychological release. Kill someone, and whatever reason you had doesn't exist any more.

Being murdered was even funnier. Dead, you begin to realize that all the petty angers and prejudices of life are not worth getting excited over.

And death—it was very peaceful. Very peaceful.

With a sigh of contentment Charlie opened his eyes.

He seemed to be in his own living room, lying on the davenport. In fact, the coffee table he had burned was directly in front of his eyes, real as life.

A few feet beyond it, sitting with his legs doubled under him was the Venusian, Mr. Ki, looking at him with round marbled eyes.

Hovering to one side was Madge. She had been saying something, but now she had stopped talking and was smiling at him.

"So you're awake, darling," she said.

Mr. Ki's blue face cracked with a friendly smile. "You haff gyuhd slirp, yesss?" he said eagerly.

Charlie didn't reply. He looked down at the coffee table, and reached out and touched it, feeling its seeming solidity.

"Mr. Ki dropped in to talk with you, Charlie," Madge said. "This afternoon when

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they couldn't move in, you were so nice to him that he thought maybe he could get you to help him fight the injunction."

"This afternoon?" Charlie echoed, puzzled.

If I had my life to live over . . .

The thought went through his mind, crystal clear. He *had* been dead. None of it had been a dream. Somehow, some way, time had been turned back. He was getting a second chance. And with the realization that it was a second chance, a chance to do the right thing, came the realization that it was his last chance.

But with that realization came an overwhelming *desire* to do things right, welcome Mr. Ki as a neighbor. He looked across the coffee table into Mr. Ki's unhuman but wise eyes, and a slow smile grew on his face.

He sat up and scratched his scalp briskly, the smile developing into a friendly grin.

"Why, sure, Mr. Ki," Charlie said. "I'll help you. I, uh, have *some* influence in this community. Don't you worry a bit. I'll get that injunction killed—" He winced at the word, then his grin came back. "I'll get to work on it first thing in the morning, and you can practically count on moving in tomorrow."

"Fanx," Mr. Ki said.

"Think nothing of it," You don't need to thank me. I should thank you—for the coffee table."

Mr. Ki looked puzzled. "Oh!" he said. "No—whlat you sray—coffree tlable. Confleshion bench." He bowed slightly, a sly smile on his glossy blue features. "Verry glood for soul. In fambly very long time."

"A CONFESSION bench!" Charlie said. "I'll be damned!"

Mr. Ki turned and shuffled toward the front door. Charlie watched him, a broad smile on his face. He ought to be mad at the damned blue-faced alien for playing a trick on him like that. He would be tomorrow when the dope Dr. Smith had given him in that cup of coffee wore off.

But there hadn't been a Dr. Smith! It had all been a dream in that mysterious soul-washing process!

Or had it?

Suddenly Charlie felt good. He sat down and rubbed his fingertips gently over the scrollwork on the Venusian confession bench. The Kis were going to be ideal neighbors. He was sure of that. . . .

"Welcome, neighbor," Charlie whispered. **THE END**

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Steps 1, 2 and 3 went according to plan. Then she moved on to . . .

STEP IV

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

ILLUSTRATOR VARGA

THE first time Juba saw him, she couldn't help recalling the description of Ariovistus in *Julius Caesar: Hominem esse barbarum, iracundum, temerarium.*

She unpinned the delicate laesa from her hair, for Terran spacemen are educated, and if they have a choice, or seem to have, prefer seduction to rape.

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Step. I. A soft answer turneth away wrath, leaving time for making plans.

He caught the flower, pleased with himself, Juba saw, for not fumbling, pleased with his manhood, pleased with his morality in deciding not to rape her.

Rule a—A man pleased with himself is off guard.

He was big, even for a Man, and all hair, and in his heavy arms the veins were knotted and very blue. He had taken off his shirt, letting the air blow shamelessly over him.

It was true he was wonderful to see. And Juba knew that such is the nature of our violences, if she had been born into such a body, she too, would be a thing of wars and cruelty, a burner of cities, a carrier of death and desolation.

His face softened, as though the hand of Juno had passed over it. Softly he gazed at the flower, softly at Juba.

Rule b—This is the only time they are tractable.

"Vene mecum," she bade him, retreating into the glade —what was left of it after his ship burned a scar into it. She ran lightly, so as to give the impression that if he turned, only so far as to pick up the weapon on the ground by his shirt, she would disappear.

"I follow," he said in her own language, and she stopped, surprise tangling her like a net. For she had been taught that Men speak only New-language in our time, all soft tongues having been scorned to death.

She should not have stopped. He looked back toward his gun. "Wait a moment," he said. His "a" 's were flat and harsh, his words awkwardly sequenced.

"Come with me," she said, and ran off again. She had been caught off guard.

Would he follow her? "Wait!" he cried, hesitated, and came after her again. "I want to get my gun." He reached for Juba's hand.

She shrank back from him. "Mulier enim sum." Would he get the force of the particle? What could he fear from a mere woman?

When he had followed her far enough, when he had gone as far as he would, for fear of losing his way from his ship, she let him take her hand.

"Terran sum," he said. And then, with meaning, "Homino sum."

"Then you are, naturally, hungry," Juba said. "You have no need to come armed.

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Let me take you to my home. There are only my sisters and I and the mother."

"Yes," he said, and took her other hand.

She blushed, because he was strangely attractive, and because the thought came to her that his ways were gentle, and that if he spoke a soft tongue, perhaps he was not like other Men.

Rule c—They are all alike.

"Come," Juba said, turning, "We are not far from the cottages."

She watched, during the meal, to see how he impressed the sisters and the mother. The little sisters—all bouncy blond curls and silly with laughter—their reaction to everything was excitement. And the mother—how could she seem so different from her daughters when they were so completely of her? They had no genes but her genes. And yet, there she sat, so dignified, offering a generous hospitality, but so cold Juba could feel it at the other end of the table. So cold—but the Man would not know, could not read the thin line of her taut lips and the faint lift at the edges of her eyes.

Juba brought him back to the ship that night, knowing he would not leave the planet.

"Mother," Juba said, kneeling before the mother and clasping her knees in supplication. "Mother . . . isn't he . . . different?"

"Juba," the mother said, "there is blood on his hands. He has killed. Can't you see it in his eyes?"

"Yes. He has a gun and he has used it. But mother—there is a gentleness in him. Could he not change? Perhaps I, myself . . ."

"Beware," the mother said sternly, "that you do not fall into your own traps."

"But you have never really known a man, have you? I mean, except for servants?"

"I have also," she said, "never had an intimate conversation with a lion, nor shared my noonday thoughts with a spider."

"But lions and spiders can't talk. That's the difference. They have no understanding."

"Neither have men. They are like your baby sister, Diana, who is reasonable until it no longer suits her, and then the only difference between her and an animal is that she has more cunning."

"Yes," Juba said resignedly, getting to her feet. "If thus it is Written. Thank you, Mother. You are a wellspring of knowledge."

"Juba," Mother said with

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a smile, pulling the girl's cloak, for she liked to please them, "would you like him for a pet? Or your personal servant?"

"No." she said, and she could feel the breath sharp in her lungs. "I would rather . . . He would make a good spectacle in the gladiatorial contests. He would look well with a sword through his heart."

She would not picture him a corpse. She put the picture from her mind. But even less would she picture him unmanned.

He would rather die strong than live weak. And Juba—why should she have this pride for him? For she felt pride, pangs as real as the pangs of childbirth. There are different kinds of pride, but the worst kind of pride is pride in strength, pride in power. And she *knew* that was what she felt. She was sinning with full knowledge and she could not put her sin from her.

Juba ran straight to the altar of Juno, and made libation with her own tears. "Mother Juno," she prayed, "take from me my pride. For pride is the wellspring whence flow all sins."

But even as she prayed, her reason pricked at her. For she was taught from childhood to be reasonable above all things. And, having spoken with this Man, having found him courteous and educated, she could not believe he was beyond redemption simply because he was a Man. It was true that in many ways he was strange and different. But were they not more alike than different?

And as for his violences—were they much better, with their gladiatorial combats? Supposed to remind them, of course, of the bloodshed they had abhorred and renounced. But who did not secretly enjoy it? And whose thumbs ever went up when the Moment came? And this making of pets and servants out of Men—what was that but the worst pride of all? Glorying that a few incisions in the brain and elsewhere gave them the power to make forever absurd what came to them with the seeds at least of sublimity.

Juba stood up. Who was she to decide what is right and what is wrong?

She faced the world and its ways were too dark for her, so she faced away.

There was a sound in the brush near her, and she wished the stars would wink out, for the sound had the rhythm

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of her Mother's approach, and Juba wanted to hide her face from her mother.

The mother frowned at Juba, a little wearily. "You have decided to forsake the world and become a Watcher of the Holy Flame. Am I not right?"

"You are right, mother."

"You think that way you avoid decision, is that not right?"

"That is right," Juba answered.

She motioned the girl to the edge of the raised, round stone and sat. "It is impossible to avoid decision. The decision is already made. What you will not do, someone else will do, and all you will have accomplished is your own failure."

"It is true," Juba said. "But why must this be done, Mother? This is a silly ceremony, a thing for children, this symbolic trial. Can we not just say, 'Now Juba is a woman,' without having to humiliate this poor Man, who after all doesn't . . . "

"Look into your heart, Juba," the mother interrupted. "Are your feelings silly? Is this the play of children?"

"No," She admitted. For never before had she been thus tormented within herself.

"You think that this Man is different, do you not? Or perhaps that all men are not so savage of soul as you have been taught. Well, I tell you that a Man's nature is built into his very chromosomes, and you should know that."

"I know, mother." For Juba was educated.

"There was a reason once, why men should be as they are. Nature is not gentle and if nature is left to herself, the timid do not survive. But if bloodlust was once a virtue, it is no longer a virtue, and if men will end up killing each other off, let us not also be killed."

"No," Juba said. For who would mind the hearths?

"All that," the mother said, rising and dusting off her robe, "is theory, and ideas touch not the heart. Let me but remind you that the choice is yours, and when the choice is made I shall not yea or nay you, but think on this —a woman, too, must have her quiet strength, and you spring of a race of queens. How shall the people look to the Tanaids for strength in times of doubt and trouble, if a Tanaid cannot meet the Trial? The choice is yours. But think on who you are."

The mother slipped away and left Juba alone in the

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quiet precinct of Juno, watching how the little fire caught at the silver backs of turned leaves when the wind blew.

Yes, Juba knew who she was, though they had never made it an important thing to be a ruler. But ruler or not, she loved her land and her home and her people, and even this ringed space of quiet where the spirit of Juno burned safely. Life somehow had chosen for her to be born and had made room for her in this particular place. Now *she* must choose *it*, freely. Otherwise she would never have in her hands the threads of her own life, and there would be no life for her. Only the complete loss of self that comes to the Watchers of the Holy Flame. And that is a holy thing, and an honor to one's house, if it is chosen from the heart. But if it is chosen from fear of crossing the passageways of life—then it is no honor but a shame.

And Juba knew she could not bear such a shame, either for her house or within the depths of her soul.

"Mother Juno," she prayed, "make clear the vision of my soul, and let me not, in my vanity, think I find good what the goddesses see to be evil."

So she rose with a strong and grateful heart, as though she had already faced her trial and had been equal to it.

The rest of the night she slept warmly, so unaware are we of the forces within us.

The first fingers of the sun pulled Juba from her cot, as they pull the dew from the green things of the earth, and she pinned in her hair the first Laesa she saw that the sun's fingers had forced.

The Man was standing beside his space ship again. It was a small ship—indeed, from the angle of Juba's approach, and from the glancings of the sun, it looked smaller than the Man.

Juba's decision held firm within her, for she saw there was no humility in him. He stood there laughing at the dawn, as though he were a very god, and were allowing the earth and sky to draw off their shadows for him, instead of standing in awe and full gratitude for the gift of life, and feeling, as one should, the smallness of a person and the weakness of a person's power, compared with the mighty forces that roll earth and sky into another day.

It is in this way, Juba thought, that men seem strong, because they have no knowledge of their own weaknesses. But it is only a seem-

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ing strength, since it stems from ignorance, and the flower of it falls early from the bush.

Juba did not, however, say all this.

Rule d—A man's ego is his most precious possession.

"You are very strong," Juba said, her eyes downcast, for he was bare again to the waist, and it had come to her that she would like to string her fingers through the hair on his chest.

"Runs in the family," he said carelessly. "But come, I had dinner with you yesterday. Let's have breakfast in my ship today."

"I . . ." What was she afraid of? If he'd meant to do her any violence, he'd have done it already. And this would provide Juba's opportunity—"Yes," she said. "I would be delighted."

There had to be some talk, and perhaps something else, before she could make her request of him. They had to be friends of some sort before he was at all likely to agree.

It is difficult to make conversation with a man.

Finally Juba gave up trying to think of something interesting to say and asked, "What is your way of life, that you should be going around by yourself in a space ship?"

"My way of life?" He laughed. "It becomes a way of life, doesn't it? Whatever we do ends up enveloping us, doesn't it?"

For a man he was thoughtful.

"I'm a scout," he said. "I don't know that I chose it as a way of life. I was born into the Solar Federation and I was born male and I grew up healthy and stable and as patriotic as any reasonable person can be expected to be. When war came I was drafted. I volunteered for scouting because the rest of it is dull. War is dull. It is unimaginably dull."

"Then why," Juba asked, for she was amazed at this, "do you fight wars?"

Again he laughed. Is there anything these men don't laugh at? "That's the riddle of the sphinx."

That is *not* the riddle of the sphinx, but Juba did not correct him.

"When you're attacked," he went on, "you fight back."

"It could not possibly," Juba said, "be as simple as you make it sound."

"Of course, it isn't," he said, and he took two square sheets that looked like papyrus, and put them each in a

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bowl. "There is the question of what you did, or did not do, that you should be attacked."

"And what did you do, or not do, that you should be attacked?"

He was pouring a bluish-looking milk over the papyrus thing. His hands were too large for everything he handled, and Juba wondered, if his hand were on her wrist, if he could crush it. Or, being able to crush it, if he would take care not to.

"Oh — trade agreements, immigration agreements, how many space ships can go where—who can say what either side did when or where to begin it all? Nobody is *making* it happen. Sometimes, perhaps. But not as far as this war is concerned. All I can say now is—O.K., for whatever reason I'm in a war. At this point, what can I do but kill or be killed?"

Juba mashed the papyrus into the milk with her spoon, as the man was doing. She took a bite. It tasted just like it looked.

"You could," Juba said, "refuse to have anything to do with it at all. You could simply go away and. . . ." She stood up and the spoon clattered to the floor and she could feel the bowl of milk spill cold and sticky along her thigh. Because that's just what you can't do. You can't pull the thread of your life out of the general weaving.

She looked at her adversary, and he was as close to her as the darkness is to the evening.

"No," he said. "Life flows. A person's life or a civilization's life or all humanity's life. If it cannot flow forward it flows backward. Isn't that true? *Isn't* it?"

But she turned away from him, to recover herself a little. For she felt that he was right and her country and her foremothers were wrong and she was wrong and yet—she had made her choice last night, at the altar of Juno, and though she felt herself possessed by new understanding, she had to go on in spite of it, as though she fought wounded or blinded.

"You are perhaps right," Juba said. "I am only a woman and I do not know. But still, can you not take a few days from your war? Must you think always on that and never on anything else?"

He ate another of the paper things, not melting it first, and drank from the container.

"Look, Juba," he said, "I've been thinking on other things

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ever since I got here, but first I want to . . ."

"First," Juba interrupted, for here was her moment, "I ask one thing of you. Only that you radio incorrect coordinates back to your base. Say you have moved on, that this is a barren world."

"Let me talk to you first," he said. "I want to . . ."

"Please," Juba begged, moving toward him. "It is no loss to you. Only a small favor, to protect our planet from outsiders, in return for . . . for whatever pleasures I can provide for you, or my sisters, if I do not please you."

"All right," he said, turning to his communication equipment. "If that's the only way you're going to let me speak to you."

"Your tape," Juba said. "Turn on your tape."

"Tape!"

"I do not speak Newlanguage. I will have to have it translated."

The man looked at Juba hard and worked at the corner of his mouth with his tongue.

"All right," he said, flipping a switch. He turned to his equipment and spoke his strange language into it. It was rough and she liked it.

"Now," he began.

"Give me the tape," Juba interrupted.

He jostled a flat box out of the wall, held the tape up to the light and snapped off a small portion and handed it to Juba.

"Come outside," she said, taking his hand. "My world is more beautiful than your space ship."

"Can't deny that," he said, watching the branches of the Untouchable Bush draw away as they walked through it.

"Now," he said, when he was stretched out on the undulant moss. He felt at the patch of moss sprouting under the warmth of his palm, and watched while an exploratory tendril curled around his little finger. "Now—do you know what it is I want of you?"

"I have," Juba said, "some idea." She hadn't known they talked about it. She thought they just did it.

"Well, you're wrong."

"Oh," she said, and stood up and walked over to the brook so he would not see her face. For she wondered wherein she was lacking and she was embarrassed. "Then," she asked, "what *do* you want of me?"

"There is, as I said, a war on. I am, as I said, a scout. I'm looking for a communica-

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tions base halfway between a certain strategic enemy outpost and a certain strategic allied outpost."

"Why?"

"Why? I don't know why. Does the grain of sand know where the beach ends? And if I did know, what would it matter?"

"But why *this* planet? There are other systems. Even other planets in this system." The moss curled under her feet and pricked at her. She was not doing this right. What did she care about his war? But she did not know what to do. She had been prepared for Seduction, Step II, and had even thought up a few things to say, though conversation is not included in the manual, because there is usually a language barrier. It was his speaking the language that made the difference.

"This is the only immediately habitable planet. You don't realize how expensive and cumbersome and logistically difficult it is to set up the simplest station on an abnormal planet. Tons of equipment are needed just to compensate for a few degrees too much temperature, or a few degrees too little, or excessive natural radiation, or a slight off balance of atmosphere. Or even if a planet is *apparently* habitable, there's no way of being absolutely sure until there have been people actually living on it for a while. There isn't time for all this. Can't you just believe me?"

"I believe you," Juba said, "and the answer is no. It is not my decision to make. I cannot decide for my people. And if I could, the answer would still be no. That is exactly why we cut ourselves off from the rest of civilization. To stay out of your wars, to carry on civilization when you have laid it waste. That is why we are a planet of parthenogenetic women."

"Is it?" he asked. "Was it to carry on the torch for civilization or to flee from it? Life flows, Juba. If it doesn't flow forward, it flows backward. Which way does your world go?"

Which way? The little stream scrambled over its bright rocks, flashing the sunlight like teeth laughing.

Which way? The servants, the pets, the gladiatorial contests. The old goddesses. Were we becoming weary with time? Juba wondered. What sense did it make? What future did it mold?

The Man got up and came

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to put his arms around Juba, crossing his arms over her chest and putting his hands on her shoulders. He leaned down until she could feel his breath on the back of her neck.

Then it was that Juba could feel from his strength that everything he said must be right, because he said it, and that he was the name for all those things inside her which had no name.

"I cannot bring you in for the Ceremonies," Juba said. "Whatever you are and whatever I am—these futures must lie with the goddesses. But sacrifice you I cannot." She turned in his arms. "Go," she said. "And quickly."

He kissed her. "I will not go," he said, and she wanted very much for him to stay, but not for the Ceremonies.

"I was to draw you into the gladiatorial contests," she said, "with rich promises. But I cannot. For those who die it is bad. But for those who live it is worse."

"Well, now you have told me and I will not be drawn," he said with that grin. "Who said women are not barbarous? It is up to you," he went on, "to free your world from its deadly isolation."

He kissed her by the vein in her neck, the heavy one, where the blood beats through. And there flashed through her head the instructions for Seduction, Step II, and she wondered that other women had been able to remember printed pages when this happened.

"You must go," Juba said, holding him so that he would not. "What do you want me to do?"

He lost his fingers in her hair, "I like blondes," he said. "And I like a slender waist." There was a tension in the muscles of his lower lip and his eyes seemed to lengthen, and by this Juba knew what he felt at that moment.

But he said, "I want you to switch off your planetary directional diverter. Even if you had let me radio in the coordinates I had they would have been wrong, wouldn't they?"

"Yes," Juba said. "But the directional diverter diverts only in certain patterns, so that it might be possible to figure out . . ."

"I know. Maybe and maybe not. I want you to turn it off long enough for me to get up beyond your whole system and have my instruments take a fix on your orbit. Then we can planet in blind, if necessary, to set up our station."

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"But as soon as you take off," Juba said, wondering if she would really do such a thing or if she would suddenly wake as from a dream and find her wits again, "they'll be on me with their questions. And what could I say to them?"

"You won't have to say anything to them," the Man said. "You'll be on the ship with me."

"With *you!*" The thought went all through Juba, as ice water does sometimes, and bubbled up into her ears. "With you." When she looked at him she really couldn't see what he looked like any more. Only a sort of shine. "You mean you'll take me away with you?"

"Do you think I could leave you?" he asked, all shiny. "Smash the thing," he said. "They'll repair it, but by that time it'll be too late."

She sat down on the moss, and he was over her, his face urgent, as for Step III. But he said, "Go ahead. Go now. And hurry."

She got up hastily, planning in her mind how she would arrange her face, so as to appear calm if anyone should see her and what excuses she would make if there were anyone about the Machine House. They had no guards and kept no watches, for why should they?

It was at the market place, near the fish stalls, that she met her mother.

The mother tugged at Juba's robe as she went by. "It is not easy for you, is it?" she asked, low, so that no one could hear.

"No," the girl said. "It is not easy." Was it not written all over her? Was it not on her breath and shaken out of her hair?

The mother looked closely at Juba and felt at her forehead. "Perhaps it is forcing you too soon," she said with a hesitant frown which for a moment made her look like someone else. "It is not too late, Juba, to get someone else. Even now . . ."

"It is too late," Juba said, and pulled away, afraid to talk more. But although the mother's face, Juba knew, was set, and her mind winding unhappily through surmises, she would not follow the girl, out of pride.

Pride.

The machine was alone. Juba cut it off and pulled the handle of the switch out. She then opened up the face plate and jerked out all the wires in sight. She reached in and

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broke off all the fine points of the compass settings and pulled out everything loose she could reach.

Then she walked back quickly through the market place, so as not to seem to be skulking.

"Juba . . ." the mother said, standing in her path.

"Later," Juba said. "It will soon be done. Mother . . . I love you. All of you." And she went around the mother, quickly.

"It is done," Juba said, giving him the switch key as though it meant something all by itself. "You have at least several hours, even if they find out at this moment. And they won't. There will be no real suspicion until your . . . our ship takes off."

After he had made love to Juba, she could see the sun was wheeling high, and in the temple they would begin to wonder a little. "We must hurry." she said, and she broke a budded branch off a laesa bush, so that later, when everything was strange, this bit of what she had been would be with her to surprise her. In strange places, but with this man.

She turned to smile at him, for her heart was full of love, and she felt that he was as much within her as he was within himself.

It was then that he grabbed her hands and tied them, and he tied her feet, and he lit a cigarette and stood for a moment, looking at her and laughing a little with his eyes.

Juba's mind was dark, very dark, as dimness after bright sunlight in the eyes. She spoke to him with her brows, afraid to ask out loud why he had done this, though there could be only one reason.

"Thanks," he said, "for all of it." Then, seeing her tears, he said, "Well, really, what did you expect?"

There was a sharp stone beneath her shoulder, and she moved against it, so that it would cut through her pain. And, feeling the blood warm on her skin her tears stopped, for it was the stone that had hurt her, and not the Man.

"You act," she said with a sneer, "as I would expect a man to act."

"And you," he said, walking off with his heavy steps, "have very kindly acted as I would expect a woman to act."

Thus it was that she opened her veins on the sharp rock. Not out of love. Not out of sorrow. Not even out of fear. Out of pride. **THE END**

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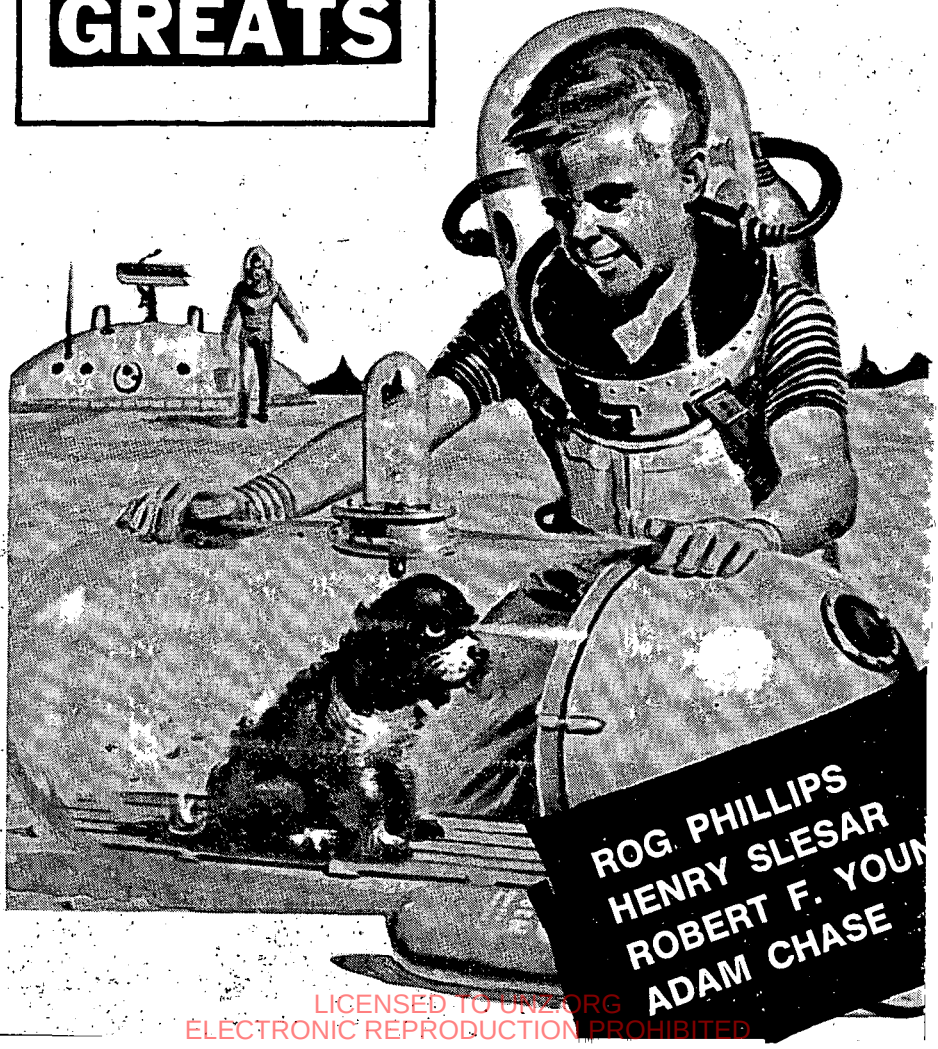

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